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Nevaeh

Book: 65

Martrace

1

The beginnings-

It just someday in some year- in 1921- she was let in the back of the 1918 Buick Pick up with a wood bed- and was forgotten about even if it was her birthday…

Miss. Darling joined Martrace who had the nickname given of 'Hope-' outside the school gates and the two of them walked in silence through the village Love Street.

They passed the greengrocer with his window full of apples and oranges. and the butcher with bloody lumps of

meat on display and naked chickens hanging up…

-Then and there-

Was the small bank. and the grocery store and the electrical shop…

And now that they were alone. Martrace (Hope) suddenly became enthusiastically energetic.

And then they came out on the other side of the village… on onto the narrow country road where there were no people anymore and very few 1921-motorcars in testudo-black.

It appears a valve had burst inside her and a great gush of energy was being released.

It was from Miss. Darling this and Miss. Darling that and Miss. Darling, I do honestly feel I could move anything in the world. not just tipping over glasses and trivial things like that.

I feel…

I… feel… could topple tables and chairs. Miss. Darling.

Even when people are sitting in the chairs, I think I could push them over. and bigger things too. much bigger things

than chairs and tables. She trotted beside Miss.

Darling with uninhabited little hops and her fingers flew as if she would toss them to the four winds and her words went off like fireworks. with tremendous speed.

I must stare at it extremely hard. Miss. Darling. extremely hard.

Like- then I can feel it all fashionable behind my eyes. and my eyes get hot just as though they were scorching but then again.

I do not mind that in the least. and Miss. Darling. I only must take a

moment to get my eyes strong and then I can push it out. this strangeness. at anything at all so long as I am staring at it hard enough.

2

‘Calm yourself down. youngster. calm yourself down.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Let us not get ourselves too worked up so early in the chronicles.’

‘But you do think it is interesting. don't you? Miss. Darling?’

‘Why must we tread carefully. Miss. Darling?’

‘Oh. it is interesting all right.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘It is more than

interesting. But we must tread very carefully from now on. Martrace.’

‘They may even be heavenly… Nonetheless, whether they are or not. let us handle them carefully.’

‘For the reason that we are playing with mysterious forces. my child. that we know nothing about. I do not think they are evil. They may be good.’

These were wise words from a wise old bird. but Martrace was too steamed up to see it that way.

‘I don't see why we have to be so cautious?’ she said. still hopping about.

‘I am trying to explain to you.’ Miss. Darling said longsuffering…

‘That we are dealing with the unidentified. It is an unexplainable thing…

The right word for it is marvel… It is a- whizz.’ ‘Am I a miracle?’ Martrace asked.

‘It is quite possible that you are.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Nonetheless. I would rather you did not think about yourself as anything now.

What I thought we might do is to explore this genius a little further… just

the two of us together; but then again making sure we take things very carefully all the time.’

‘You want me to do some more of it then. Miss. Darling?’

‘That is what I am tempted to suggest.’ Miss. Darling said cautiously.

‘Goody-good.’ Martrace said.

‘I.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I am probably far more bowled over by what you did than you are. and I am trying to find some reasonable explanation.’

‘Such as what?’ Martrace asked.

‘Such as whether or not it's got something to do with the fact that you are quite exceptionally precocious.’

‘What exactly does that word mean?’ Martrace said.

‘A precocious child.' Miss. Darling said. ‘Is one that shows amazing intelligence early on. You are an unbelievably precocious child.’

‘Am I really?’ Martrace asked.

‘Of course. you are. You must be aware of that. Look at what you are reading. Look at your mathematics.’

‘I suppose you're right.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling marveled at the child's lack of conceit and self-consciousness.

‘I can't help wondering.' she said. ‘Whether this sudden ability has come to you. Of being able to move an object without touching it. whether it might not have something to do with your brainpower.’

‘You mean there might not be room in my head for all those brains, so something has to push out?’

‘That's not quite what I mean.’ Miss. Darling said.

Smiling… ‘But whatever happens… and I say it again. We must tread carefully from now on. I have not forgotten… that strange and distant glimmer on your face after you tipped over the last glass.’

‘Do you think doing it could actually… hurt me? Is that what you are thinking? Miss. Darling?’

‘It made you feel pretty peculiar… didn't it?’

‘It made me feel lovely.’ Martrace said. ‘For a moment or two, I was flying past the stars on silver wings.’

Along with say- ‘I told you that.’

And moments later saying- ‘And intend to I tell you something else. Miss. Darling? It was easier the second time… much easier.’

‘I think it's like anything else. the more you practice it. the easier it gets.’

Miss. Darling was walking slowly so that the small child could keep up with her without trotting too fast.

3

And it was very peaceful out there on the narrow road now that the village was behind them.

It was one of those golden autumn afternoons and there were

blackberries and splashes of old man's beard in the hedges.

And the hawthorn berries were ripening scarlet for the birds when the chilly winter came along.

There were tall trees here and there on either side. oak, sycamore, and ash and occasionally a sweet chestnut.

There was a high hedge of hazel on either side, and you could see clusters of ripe brown nuts in their green jackets.

The squirrels would be collecting them all very soon.

Miss. Darling said. and storing them away carefully for the bleak months ahead. Miss. Darling.

Wishing to change the subject for the moment… gave the names of all these to Martrace and taught her how to recognize them by the shape of their leaves and the pattern of the bark on their trunks.

Martrace took all this in and stored the knowledge away carefully in her mind.

They came finally to a gap in the hedge on the left-hand side of the road where there was a five-barred gate. ‘This

way.’ Miss. Darling said. and she opened the gate and led Martrace through and closed it again.

They were now walking along a narrow lane that was no more than a rutted cart-track.

‘You mean you live down here?’ Martrace asked.

‘I do.’ Miss. Darling replied… nonetheless, she said nothing more or further.

Martrace had never once stopped to think about where Miss. Darling might be living.

She had always regarded her purely as a teacher.

A person who turned up out of nowhere and taught at school and then went away again.

Do any of us children… she wondered…

Like- yah- ever stop to ask ourselves where our teachers go when school is over for the day? Do we wonder if they live alone?

Or if there is a mother at home, a sister, or a husband? ‘Do you live all by yourself?’

Miss. Darling?’ she asked.

‘It's just a farm laborer's cottage.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘You mustn't expect too much of it. We're approximately there.’

They came to a small green gate half-buried in the hedge on the right and almost buried by the overhanging hazel branches. Miss. Darling paused with one hand on the gate and spoke. ‘There it is. That's where I live.’

‘Yes.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Very much so.’

They were walking over the deep sunbaked mud-tracks of the lane, and you

had to watch where you put your feet if you did not want to twist your ankle.

There were a few small birds around in the hazel branches but that was all.

Martrace saw a narrow dirt path leading to a tiny red-brick cottage.

The cottage was so small it looked more like a doll's house than a human dwelling.

The bricks it was built of were old and crumbly and very pale red. It had a grey slate roof and one small chimney. and there were two little windows at the front.

Each window was no larger than a sheet of a tabloid newspaper and there was no upstairs to the place.

On either side of the path, there was a wilderness of nettles and blackberry thorns and long brown grass.

An enormous oak tree stood overshadowing the cottage. Its massive spreading branches seemed to be enfolding and embracing the tiny building. and hiding it as well from the rest of the world.

4

Would you all say that it was cute to see home your mom and dad are with

you when you come into their life that loving moment- left in time?

So- even so when they find that their youngster is the most repulsive thing to ever share the same air as they do. It is the grossest thing you could ever imagine or wrap your mind around. they still think that he or she is magnificent or slenderizes.

Some moms and dads go more. extra than others. They develop so-o blinded by admiration. love… consent. with wonder.

The achievement to sway and influence. themselves their youngster has the wherewithal of mastermind.

Really in all fact, there was not a thing wrong with this… at all.

Never- ever- world this is not right. The world just works this way. ‘Carry us a washbowl! We're going to be sick!’ U-ah- he said…

It is only when the mom and dad begin telling you and me about the wisdom of their own disgusting. suck. twisting scum-sucking butt hole licker’s… children. That we shock disturbance.

‘Your son is the best thing ever. You’re going to say it.’ …is an over-all wash-out to say.

I have faith that you have a family.

Trade you can thrust or shove him into when he/she leaves school. and because he/she is very sure as all hell he or she won’t get a job anyplace otherwise.’ If yours truly were a teacher. I would prepare up some physical scorchers for the kids of loving. devoted. Kissie- Kissie goo-goo- parents.

School educators undergo a good deal from having to listen to this sort of

balderdash nonrenewal crap- from gratified close relatives like mom and dad.

Nonetheless, they typically get their own back when the time comes to author the end-of-term reports. Before. like if yours truly were feeling poetic that daylight. I- myself- me- here… might pen down. ‘It is an enquiring actuality. which grasshoppers.

Like- like- like- have their hearing-organs on the sides of the abdomen. Your daughter Emma.

She is arbitrating by what she is erudite this period.

Has no audible range-

publications at all-to speak of?’

Yeah- I would say I may even investigate an unfathomable into ordinary history and say that. ‘The journal cicada employs seven ages as a nourishment antiestablishment.

as well as no more than seven days as a welcome individual of sunbeams and air. Your son/or girl has paid out seven years as nourishment in this school.

And now we are still in the making for him/her to arise from the cocoon.’

A chiefly mephitic little girl might sting me into proverbing.

‘Sandy has the same glacial beauty yet so cold-heartedly like a stone. but unlike the stone. she has absolutely nothing below the surface- nothing but looks.’

I meditate… I for one might relish writing end-of-term intelligence for the horrors in my class.

Like- however enough of that BS- kids suck lady-nuts. We must get on… with the dumb… for that is all they are- on like this one here that is oh mighty.

And magnificent- in their wisdom. and wonderers' thoughts of the mind.

Frequently- like every so often. one comes across a close relative who takes the contradictory line.

Who shows no notice at all in their youngsters?

And this of course is far worse than the doting ones.

Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter were two such parents.

They had a son called Peter and a daughter called Martrace. and the parents watched upon Martrace in certain as zero zil- notta crap in the bowl- that

needed to be plunged and flush tree weeks ago- a

stinking shipping- pill… of doo- no more than a layer over the yellowing pee.

Just crap- something you must put up. or then get it out and grunt too- until the time comes your done with it and zip up- and move on with the day.

Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter beheld accelerative massively to the phase when they could dump their little daughter off- as sh*t and flush her away for their lives.'

If possible, into the next region and or next plant- or even supplementary more than that even.

It is immoral that an adequate quantity of when blood relation treats everyday youngsters as all the same, they were crap and poopy.

On the other hand, it turns out to be one way or another a- lot inferior when the juvenile in inquiry is extraordinary. and by that. I mean complex as well as vivid.

Martrace was both things. On the other hand, above all she was dazzling. Her cognizance was so-o nimble, and she was so quick to learn.

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That her capability ought to have been understandable even to the most half-witted of parents.

Nonetheless, Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter were both so-o gorm-less and so-0 enfolded up in their own senseless meaningless. and absurd slight lives that they fail to get or see that no matter what infrequent.

Uncommon about their daughter.

To communicate the actuality.

I doubt they would have noticed had she crept into the house with a broken 2 legs one day when they did not see.

By the age of one and a half, her speech was flawless faultless. marvels. as well as she knew as many words as most grown-ups.

The parents… instead of applauding her. called her a noisy blabbermouth and told her abruptly that small girls should be understood and not overheard.

Martrace's brother Peter was a perfectly normal boy. but the sister. as I said. It was something to make your eyes pop.

By the time she was three.

Martrace had taught herself to read by studying newspapers and magazines that lay around the house.

At the age of four.

She could read fast and well, and she naturally began hankering after books.

The only book in the whole of this enlightened household was something called Easy Cooking belonging to her mother.

And when she had read this from cover to cover and had learned all the recipes by heart. She decided she wanted

something more interesting. ‘Daddy.’ she said.

‘Do you think you could buy me a book?’

‘A book?’ he said.

‘What do you want a freaking book for dumb butt?’ ‘To read. Daddy.’

‘What's wrong with going to see a MOVIE.

For heaven's sake- a little girl?

We have a lovely MOVIE with a sixty-inch screen and now you come asking for a book to read in have

imagination time! You are getting so-o spoiled. girl!’

Every ordinary midafternoon Martrace was left alone in the household. Her brother (four years older than her…)

She went to school, and she was there to care for herself- yet that is the way she loved it. Ms. Dicksnoter was hooked on being a fashionista. doing hair styling and being a drama queen- and playing the man in bars- when dad was not looking- it five afternoons a week she was seen playing the game- and making her wages in that way- good look as she said to get you far- even if with her that may not be so… Her father went to work-

on the railroad… working on steamers… a murky dirty- hot job… where he would pass off crap for good engines… she this here- 1888- you like the wheels are falling off- and the boilers blow- what do I do- I sell it to you- what do you say?

1918 Cadillac is sitting running as they were talking- walking past all the important things and load- like crossing tracks with moving train- at her feet at the age of five- she arrived. she introduced herself to the librarian.

Martrace was in love with the new light- and the cars putting along outside- in this small western county town that she was seeing in her way- a way of

wonder- and massive thought behind it- looking around all old wood buildings- and dart roads.

Ms. Smaith. She asked if she might sit awhile and read a book. Ms. Smaith. slightly in awe at the arrival, this tiny young girl-and being- solo- with no parents to behead by. All the same, she told her she was very welcome to look at all the books.

It is like new- better… On the afternoon of the day when her father had refused to buy her a book.

Martrace set out all by herself to walk to the public library in the village.

‘Where are the children's books, please?’ Martrace asked… softly shyly… where are the kiddie books… ‘They're over there on those lower shelves- Ms. Smaith told her do you see.’ -Yes- thank you… ‘Would you like me to help you find a nice one with lots of drawings on it… so it not too hard for you to get…?’No. thank you.’ Martrace said. ‘I'm sure I can accomplish this- feet with no issues or complaints.’

It now dark- she is still sitting there as the gas laps outside flicker… the train- blow got there hunting crays and grind on the rails. House's pass- a man snaps a long photo on a shudder camera… a boy is calling out for newspapers- as the

burn burls are light for heat man standing signing old songs- of land- in the cold wicked streets- you can see the puff of their breath… yet she forgot all about the time… lost in the lands of her books. Where there was no pain of heat… just play. Martrace would toddle down to the library like this- every day she could rain- sleet- and mud. It did not matter- there was the girl with long dark hair with the ridden in it- and a sundress reading books.

The walk took only ten minutes. and this allowed her two glorious hours sitting quietly by herself in a cozy corner devouring one book after another. When

she had read every single child's book in the place. she started wandering around in search of something else.

Ms. Smaith. Who had been watching her with charm for the past few weeks? Now got up from her desk and went over to her yet in admiration. ‘Can I help you? Martrace?’ she asked.

‘I'm deliberating what to read next.’ Martrace said. ‘I've finished all the children's books.’ All 500 she said.

Yes- ‘You mean you've looked at the pictures?’

NO…! um- ‘Yes. but I've read the books as also.’

Ms. Smaith gazed downwards at Martrace from her great height. which was only like three feet. and Martrace looked right back up at her towering.

‘I thought some were very underprivileged.’ Martrace said. ‘But others were lovely. I liked Engen 14, which was the best of them all- she carried it out. It was full of specifics. The mystery of the room behind the closed door and the mystery of the garden behind the big wall.’ Ms. Smaith was dumbfounded by this girl's considerations and words. ''Exactly how old are you, little girl. Martrace?’ she asked. ‘Five

years and one month.’ Martrace said timidly.

Ms. Smaith was more stunned than ever. but she had the sense not to show it. ‘What sort of a book would you like to read next?’ she asked.

Martrace said. ‘I would like a really good one that grown-ups read. A famous one. I don't know any names.’

Ms. Smaith looked along the shelves. taking her time. She did not know what to bring out. How. she asked herself. does one choose a famous grown-up book for a four-year-old girl? Her first thought was to pick a young teenager's

romance of the kind that is written for fifteen-year-old schoolchildren.

But for some reason, she found herself instinctively walking past that shelf.

‘Try this.’ she said at last. ‘It's incredibly famous and particularly good. If it is too long for you. just let me know and I'll find something shorter and a bit easier.’

‘Great Expectations.’ Martrace read. ‘By Charles Dickens.

I'd love to try it.’

I must be mad. Ms. Smaith told herself. but to Martrace she said.

‘Of course, you may try it.’

Over the next few afternoons, Ms. Smaith could hardly take her eyes off the small girl sitting for hour after hour in the big armchair at the far end of the room with the book on her lap.

It was necessary to rest it on the lap because it was too heavy for her to hold up. which meant she had to sit leaning forward to read.

And a strange sight it was. this tiny dark-haired person sitting there with her feet nowhere near touching the floor.

Absorbed in the wonderful adventures of Pip and old Miss. Havisham

and her cobwebbed house and by the spell of magic that Dickens, the great storyteller, had woven with his words. The only movement from the reader was the lifting of the hand now and then to turn over a page. and Ms. Smaith always felt sad when the time came for her to cross the floor and say, ‘It's ten to five. Martrace.’

During the first week of Martrace's visits, Ms. Smaith had said to her. ‘Does your mother walk you down here every day and then take you home?’

‘My mother goes to Aylesbury every afternoon to play bingo.’

Martrace had said. ‘She doesn't know I come here.’

‘But that's surely not right.’ Ms. Smaith said. ‘I think you'd better ask her.’

‘I'd rather not.’ Martrace said. ‘She doesn't encourage reading books. Nor does my father.’

‘But what do they expect you to do every afternoon in an empty house?’

‘Just mooch around and watch the telly.’

‘I see.’

‘She doesn't care what I do.’ Martrace said a little sadly.

Ms. Smaith was concerned about the child's safety on the walk through the busy village Love Street and the crossing of the road. but she decided not to interfere.

Within a week. Martrace had finished Great Expectations which in that edition contained four hundred and eleven pages. ‘I loved it.’ she said to Ms. Smaith. ‘Has Mr. Dickens written any others?’

‘A substantial number.’ said the astounded Ms. Smaith. ‘Intend to I choose you another?’

Over the next six months. under Ms. Smaith's watchful and compassionate eye. Martrace read the following books:

- Nicholas Nickleby by Charles Dickens
- Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte
- Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens
- Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen
- Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy
- Nevaeh by: Marcel Ray Duriez
- Gone to Earth by Mary Webb

- White Fang by Jack London
- Frankenstein by Mary Shelley
- The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway
- Brighton Rock by Graham Greene
- The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner
- The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck the Good

Companions by J. B. Priestley

- Kim by Rudyard Kipling
- Animal Farm by George Orwell

It was a formidable list and by now Ms. Smaith was filled with wonder and excitement. but it was a good thing that she did not allow herself to be completely carried away by it all.

Anyone else witnessing the achievements of this small child would have been tempted to make a great fuss and shout the news all over the village and beyond. but not so Ms. Smaith.

She was someone who minded her own business and had long since discovered it was seldom worthwhile interfering with other people's children.

‘Mr. Hemingway says a lot of things I don't understand.’

Martrace said to her. ‘Especially about men and women.’

‘Nonetheless, I loved it all the same. The way he tells it I am right there on the spot watching it all happen.’

''A fine writer will always make you feel that.’ Ms. Smaith said. ‘And don't worry about the bits you can't understand.

Sit back and allow the words to wash around you. like music.’

‘I will. I will.’

‘Did you know?' Ms. Smaith said. ‘That public libraries like this allow you to borrow books and take them home?’

‘I didn't know that.’ Martrace said. ‘Could I, do it?’

‘Of course.’ Ms. Smaith said. ‘When you have chosen the book, you want. Bring it to me so I can make a note of it, and it is yours for two weeks. You can take more than one if you wish.’

From then on. Martrace would visit the library only once a week to take out new books and return the old ones.

Her small bedroom now became her reading-room and… there she would sit and read most afternoons.

Often with a mug of hot chocolate beside her. She was not tall enough to reach things around the kitchen.

But she kept a small box in the outhouse which she brought in and stood on to get whatever she wanted.

Mostly it was hot chocolate she made. warming the milk in a saucepan on the stove before mixing it. Occasionally she made Bovril or Ovaltine. It was pleasant to take a hot drink up to her room and have it beside her as she sat in

her silent room reading in the empty house in the afternoons.

The books transported her into new worlds and familiarized her with amazing people who lived exciting lives.

She went on olden day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad.

She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She traveled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.

6

The First Phenomenon-

The Mcfarts seated herself overdue at the teacher's table. Martrace sat down again at her school desk.

Still holding the pitcher by the handle but not invigorating it hitherto. she spoke. ‘I have never- ever been able to comprehend why small children are so revolting.

It was the first time she had to sit down- freaking sit- down throughout the class.

Then she got hold of out a hand and took hold of her water-pitcher.

They should be got free of as early as conceivable.

They are the misery of my life. They are like creatures.

We get rid of flies with fly-spray and by droopy up flypaper.

I have often thought of discovering a spray to get rid of small youngsters.

Otherwise better still. some huge strips of gluey paper.

How marvelous it would be to walk into this schoolroom with enormous spray-pistols in my hands and start thrusting it.

I would hang them all around the school and you would all get stuck to them and that would be the end of it.

Wouldn't that be a clever idea?

Miss. Darling?’

‘If it's meant to be a joke. Principal. I don't think it's a very funny one.’ Miss. Darling said from the back of the classroom during the lecture.

The women mad. Miss. Darling was telling herself. She is rounded the twist. She is the one who ought to be got rid of.

The Mcfarts now lifted the large blue porcelain water-jug and poured some

water into her glass. ‘You wouldn't. would you. Miss. Darling.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘And it's not meant to be a joke. My idea of a picture-perfect school. Miss. Darling. has no youngsters in it at all were there all in the graveyard not talking back?

Um-hum- stone-cold quit- they hear you that way… like living under a rock… she said back. One of these days I intend to start up a school like that. I think it will be amazingly effective to freaking dumb- playing with themselves.’

I like you did- Missy… over there… as a girl. As well as unexpectedly. with water. out came the stretched

sycophantic lizard straight into the glass. plop!

The Mcfarts let out a yell and leaped off her chair as though a firecracker had gone off beneath her.

As well as now the children also saw the long thin slimy yellow-bellied lizard-like mortal meandering and revolving relaxing- spinning- like in the glass.

And they wriggled and jumped about as well. shouting.

Oh. It is disgusting! It is a serpent! It is a baby queue! It's an alligator!’

‘What is it?

‘Lookout. Miss. Mcfarts!’ cried Dasey. ‘I'll bet it bites!’

She was especially furious that someone had succeeded in making her jump and yell like that because she prided herself on her toughness.

Natural history was not her strong point.

She had not the faintest idea what this thing was.

The Mcfarts.

This womanly giant. stood there in her green breeches. trembling like a

blancmange. She stared at the creature snaking and wriggling in the glass. Inquisitively enough. She had never seen a newt before. It certainly looked extremely unpleasant. Gradually she sat down again in her chair.

She looked at this moment more frightening than ever before. The fires of fury and hatred were shouldering in her small black eyes.

‘Martrace!’ she barked. ‘Stand up!’

‘Who. me?’ Martrace said. ‘What have I done?’

‘Stand up. You are revolting little cock-suck!’

‘I haven't done anything. Miss. Mcfarts. honestly. I have not. I've never seen that slimy thing before!’

‘Stand up at once. your filthy little piss-puss-squirt!’

On the other hand. she was certainly not about to own up. Unenthusiastically. Martrace got to her feet. She was in the second row. Dasey was in the row behind her. feeling a bit guilty. She had not intended to get her friend into trouble.

I intend to have you drummed out of this establishment in utter disgrace! I intend to have the prefects chase you down the corridor and out of the front door with hockey-sticks! ''You are vile. repulsive. repellent. malicious tiny brute!’

The Mcfarts were shouting. ‘You are not fit to be in this school- you suck at life- and should kill yourself now and get it over with! You ought to be behind bars.

That is where you ought to be! I intend to have the staff escort you home under armed guard! And then I intend to make sure you are sent to a reformatory for delinquent girls for a minimum of forty years!’

The Mcfarts was in such a rage that her face had taken on a boiled color and little flecks of froth were gathering… at the corners of her mouth.

Nonetheless, she was not the only one who was losing her cool. She could see the justice of that. It was. however. a new experience for her to be accused of a crime that she had not committed. Martrace was also beginning to see red.

She did not in the least mind being accused of having done something she had done. She had had absolutely nothing to do with that beastly creature in the glass. ‘I did not do it!’ she screamed.

By holly freaking farting golly. she thought.

That awful Mcfarts is not going to iota this one on me! The Mcfarts roared back ‘Oh yes. you did!’ ‘Nobody else could have thought up a trick like that! Your father was right to warn me about you!’ The woman seemed to have lost the regulator of herself entirely. She was ranting like a fanatic- and freaking out. ‘You are finished in this school. young lady!’ she shouted. ‘You are finished everywhere. I intend to see to it that you are put away in a place where not even the crows can land their fertilizers on

you! You will probably never become exposed again!’

7

‘I'm telling you I did not do it!’ Martrace screamed. ‘I've never even seen a creature like that in my life!’

‘You have put a- a- a fuc- fa- frack freaking- queue in my drinking water!’ (She holds her words back) the Mcfarts yelled back. ‘There is no worse crime in the world against a Headmistress! Now sit down and do not say a word! Go on. sit down at once!’

‘Nevertheless. I'm telling you.’ Martrace shouted… refusing to sit down.

The Mcfarts were sitting behind the teacher's table starting with a mixture of horror and fascination at the newt wriggling in the glass. Martrace's eyes were also riveted on the glass. And now. quite slowly. there began to creep over Martrace a most extraordinary and peculiar feeling. The feeling was mostly in the eyes. A kind of electricity seemed to be gathering inside them. A sense of power was brewing in her eyes. a feeling of great strength was settling deep inside her eyes. But there was also another feeling which something was else altogether.

And which she could not understand. It was like flashes of lightning. Little waves of lightning seemed to be flashing out of her eyes. Her eyeballs were beginning to get hot. as though vast energy was building up somewhere inside them. It was an amazing sensation. She kept her eyes steadily on the glass.

…And now the power was concentrating in one small part of each eye and growing stronger and stronger, and it felt as though millions of tiny little invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out of her eyes towards the glass she was staring at.

‘Tip it!’ Martrace whispered. ‘Tip it over!’

‘I am telling you to shut up!’ the Mcfarts roared. ‘If you do not shut up at once and sit down, I intend to remove my belt and let you have it with the end that has the buckle!’

Slowly Martrace sat down. Oh. the rottenness of it all! The unfairness! How dare they expel her for something she had not done!

Martrace felt herself getting angrier. and angrier. and angrier. so-o unbearably angry that something was bound to explode inside her very soon.

The newt was still squirming in the tall glass of water. It looked uncomfortable. The glass was not big enough for it. Martrace glared at the Mcfarts.

How she hated her. She glared at the glass with the newt in it.

She longed to march up and grab the glass and tip the contents. newt and all. over the Mcfarts's head.

She trembled to think what the Mcfarts would do to her if she did that.

‘Tip it!’ she whispered again. ‘Tip it over!’

Once more the glass wobbled. She pushed harder still. willing her eyes to shoot out more power.

And then… very slowly.

So slowly she could hardly see it happening. The glass began to lean backward. farther and farther and farther back until it was balancing on just one edge of its base.

And there it teetered for a few seconds before finally toppling over and falling with a sharp tinkle onto the desktop.

The water in it and the squirming newt splashed out all over Miss. Mcfarts's

enormous bosom. The principal let out a yell that must have rattled every windowpane in the building and for the second time in the last five minutes she shot out of her chair like a rocket.

The newt clutched desperately at the cotton smock where it covered the great chest and there it clung with its little claw-like feet. The Mcfarts looked down and saw it and she bellowed even louder and with a swipe of her hand, she sent the creature flying across the classroom. It landed on the floor beside Dasey's desk and very quickly she ducked down and picked it up and put it into her pencil-box for another time. A newt. she

decided. was a useful thing to have around?

The Mcfarts. her face more like a boiled ham than ever. was standing before the class quivering with fury. She saw the glass wobble. It tilted backward a fraction of an inch. then righted itself again. Her massive bosom was heaving in and out and the splash of water down the front of it made a dark wet patch that had soaked right through to her skin. ‘Who did it?’ she roared. Who is guilty of this filthy profession?

Who pushed over this glass?’ ‘Come on- come on! Own up your hood liker! Step forward! You will not escape

this time! She kept pushing at it with all those millions of invisible little arms and hands that were reaching out from her eyes. feeling the power that was alternating straight from the two little black dots in the very centers of her eyeballs. Nobody answered. The whole room remained silent as a tomb.

‘Martrace!’ she roared. ‘It was you! I know it was you!’ Martrace. in the second row. sat very still and said nothing. A strange feeling of serenity and confidence was sweeping over her and suddenly, she found that she was frightened by nobody in the world.

With the power of her eyes alone she had compelled a glass of water to tip and spill its contents over the horrible Headmistress. and anybody who could do that could do whatsoever.

‘Speak up say it- ball groper. you clotted carbuncle!’ roared the Mcfarts.

‘Admit that you did it!’

Suddenly the entire class seemed to rise against the Headmistress. ‘None of the children did. Miss. Mcfarts.’ Miss. Darling answered. ‘I can vouch for it that nobody has moved from his or her desk all the time you've been here. except for Tom

and he has not moved from his corner.’ ‘She didn't move!’ they cried out.

‘Martrace didn't move! Nobody moved! You must have knocked it over yourself!’ Martrace looked right back into the flashing eyes of this infuriated female giant and said with total calmness. ‘I have not moved away from my desk. Miss. Mcfarts. since the lesson began. I can say no more.’ ‘I most certainly did not knock it over myself!’ roared the Mcfarts. ‘How dare you suggest a thing like that! Speak up. Miss. Darling! You must have seen everything! Who knocked over my glass?’

Miss. Mcfarts glared at Miss. Darling. Miss. Darling met her gaze

without flinching. ‘I am telling you the truth. Principal.’ she said. ‘You must have knocked it over without knowing it. That sort of thing is easy to do.’

‘I am fed up with your useless bunch of midgets!’ roared the Mcfarts. ‘I refuse to waste any more of my precious time here!’ And with that, she marched out of the classroom. slamming the door behind her.

In the stunned silence that followed. Miss. Darling walked up to the front of the class and stood behind her table. ‘Phew!’ she said. ‘I think we've had enough school for one day. don't you? The class is to dismiss. You may all go out to

the playground and wait for your parents to take you home.’

The Second Miracle-

Martrace did not join the rush to get out of the classroom. After the other children had all disappeared. she remained at her desk. quiet and thoughtful.

She knew she had to tell somebody about what had happened with the glass. She could not keep a gigantic secret like that bottled up inside her. What she needed was just one person. one wise and sympathetic grown-up who

could help her to understand the meaning of this extraordinary happening.

Neither her mother nor her father would be of any use at all. If they believed her story. and it was doubtful they would. they certainly would fail to realize what an astounding event it was that had taken place in the classroom that afternoon.

Impulsively. Martrace decided that the one person she would like to confide in was Miss. Darling.

Martrace and Miss. Darling were now the only two lefts in the classroom. Miss. Darling had seated herself at her

table and was rifling through some papers. She looked up and spoke.

‘Well. Martrace. aren't you going outside with the others?’

8

Martrace said. ‘Please, may I talk to you for a moment?’

‘Of course, you may. What's troubling you?’

‘Something very peculiar has happened to me. Miss.

Darling.’

Miss. Darling became instantly alert. Ever since the two disastrous

meetings she had had recently about Martrace. the first with the Headmistress and the second with the dreadful Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter. Miss. Darling had been thinking a great deal about this child and wondering how she could help her. And now. here was Martrace sitting in the classroom with a curiously exalted look on her face and asking if she could have a private talk. Miss. Darling had never seen her looking so wide-eyed and peculiar before.

‘Yes. Martrace.’ she said. ‘Tell me what has happened to you that is so peculiar.’

‘Miss. Mcfarts isn't going to expel me. is she?’ Martrace asked. ‘Because it wasn't me who put that creature in her jug of water. I promise you it wasn't.’

‘I know it wasn't.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Am I going to be expelled?’

‘I think not.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘The Headmistress simply got a little over-excited. That’s all.’

‘Good.’ Martrace said. ‘But that isn't what I want to talk to you about.’

‘What do you want to talk to me about. Martrace?’

‘I want to talk to you about the glass of water with the creature in it.’ Martrace said. ‘You saw it spilling all over Miss.

Mcfarts. didn't you?’

‘I did indeed.’

‘Well. Miss. Darling. I did not touch it. I never went near it.’

‘I know you didn't.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘You heard me telling the

Principal that it couldn't possibly have been you.’

‘Ah. but it was me. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘That's exactly what I want to talk to you about.’

Miss. Darling paused and looked carefully at the child. ‘I don't think I quite follow you.’ she said.

‘I got so angry at being accused of something I hadn't done that I made it happen.’

‘You made that happen. Martrace?’

‘I made the glass tip over.’

‘I still don't quite understand what you mean.’ Miss. Darling said gently.

‘I did it with my eyes.’ Martrace said. ‘I was staring at it and wishing it to tip and then my eyes went all hot and funny and some sort of power came out of them, and the glass just toppled over.’

Miss. Darling continued to look steadily at Martrace through her steel-rimmed spectacles and Martrace looked back at her just as steadily.

‘I am still not following you.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Do you mean you willed the glass to tip over?’

‘Yes.’ Martrace said. ‘With my eyes.’

Miss. Darling was silent for a moment. She did not think Martrace was meaning to tell a lie. It was more likely that she was simply allowing her vivid imagination to run away with her. ‘You mean you were sitting where you are now, and you told the glass to topple over, and it did?’

‘Something like that. Miss. Darling. yes.’

‘If you did that. then it is just about the greatest miracle a person has ever performed since the time of Jesus.’

‘I did it. Miss. Darling.’

It is extraordinary. thought Miss. Darling. How often do small children have flights of fancy like this?

She decided to put an end to it as gently as possible. ‘Could you do it again?’ She asked. kindly.

‘I don't know.’ Martrace said. ‘But I think I might be able to.’

Miss. Darling moved the now empty glass to the middle of the table. ‘Should I put water in it?’ she asked. smiling a little.

‘I don't think it matters.’ Martrace said.

‘Very well. then. Go ahead and tip it over.’

‘It may take some time.’

Take all the time you want.’ Miss. Darling said. I'm in no hurry.’

Martrace. sitting in the second row about ten feet away from Miss. Darling. put her elbows on the desk and cupped her face in her hands. and this time she gave the order right at the beginning.

‘Tip glass. tip!’ she ordered. but her lips did not move, and she made no sound. She simply shouted the words inside her head. And now she

concentrated the whole of her mind and her brain and her will up into her eyes and once again but much more quickly than before she felt the electricity gathering and the power was beginning to surge, and the hotness was coming into the eyeballs. and then the millions of tiny invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out towards the glass. and without making any sound at all she kept on shouting inside her head for the glass to go over.

She saw it wobble. then it tilted. Then it toppled right over and fell with a tinkle onto the table-top not twelve inches from Miss. Darling's folded arms.

Miss. Darling's mouth dropped open and her eyes stretched so wide you could see the whites all around. She did not say a word. She could not. The shock of seeing the miracle performed had struck her dumb.

She gaped at the glass. leaning far away from it now as though it might be a dangerous thing. Then slowly she lifted her head and looked at Martrace.

She saw the child white in the face. as white as paper. trembling all over. the eyes glazed. staring straight ahead and seeing nothing. The whole face was transfigured. her eyes round and bright and she was sitting there

speechless. quite beautiful in a blaze of silence.

Miss. Darling waited. trembling a little herself and watching the child as she slowly stirred herself back into consciousness.

And then suddenly. click went her face into a look of almost seraphic calm. ‘I'm all right.’ she said and smiled. ‘I'm quite all right. Miss. Darling. so don't be alarmed.’

‘You seemed so far away.’ Miss. Darling whispered. awestruck.

‘Oh. I was. I was flying past the stars on silver wings.’

Martrace said. ‘It was wonderful.’

Miss. Darling was still gazing at the child in absolute wonderment. as though she were The Creation. The Beginning of the World. The First Morning.

‘It went much quicker this time.’ Martrace said quietly.

‘It's not possible!’ Miss. Darling was gasping. ‘I don't believe it! I simply don't believe it!’ She closed her eyes and kept them closed for quite a while. and when she opened them again it seemed as though she had gathered herself together.

‘Would you like to come back and have tea at my cottage?’ she asked.

‘Oh. I'd love to.’ Martrace said.

‘Good. Gather up your things and I'll meet you outside in a couple of minutes.’

‘You won't tell anyone about this. this thing that I did. will you. Miss. Darling?’

‘I wouldn't dream of it.’ Miss. Darling said.

The following morning. just before the father left for his beastly second-hand car garage. Martrace slipped into the cloakroom and got hold of the hat

he wore each day to work. She had to stand on her toes and reach up as high as she could with a walking-stick to hook the hat off the peg. and even then, she only just made it. The hat itself was one of those flat-topped pork-pie jobs with a Duriez's feather stuck in the hatband and Mr. Dicksnoter were immensely proud of it. He thought it gave him a rakish daring look. especially when he wore it at an angle with his loud checked jacket and green tie.

Martrace. holding the hat in one hand and a thin tube of Superglue in the other. proceeded to squeeze a line of glue very neatly all-round the inside rim of the

hat. Then she carefully hooked the hat back onto the peg with the walking stick. She timed this operation very carefully. applying the glue just as her father was getting up from the breakfast table.

Mr. Dicksnoter did not notice anything when he put the hat on. but when he arrived at the garage, he could not get it off.

Superglue is immensely powerful stuff. so powerful it will take your skin off if you pull too hard. Mr. Dicksnoter did not want to be scalped so he had to keep the hat on his head the entire day long. even when putting sawdust in gearboxes

and fiddling the mileages of cars with his electric drill.

To save face. He adopted a casual attitude hoping that his staff would think that he meant to keep his hat on all day long just for the heck of it. like gangsters do in films.

When he got home that evening, he still could not get the hat off.

‘Don't be silly.’ his wife said. ‘Come here. I'll take it off for you.’

She gave the hat a sharp yank. Mr. Dicksnoter let out a yell that rattled the windowpanes. ‘Ow-w-w!’ he screamed.

‘Don't do that! Let us go! You'll take half the skin off my forehead!’

Martrace nestling in her usual chair. was watching this performance over the rim of her book with some interest.

‘What's the matter. daddy?’ she said. ‘Has your head suddenly swollen or something?’

The father glared at his daughter with deep suspicion. but said nothing. How could he? Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. ‘It must be Superglue. It could not be anything else. That will teach you to go play around with nasty stuff like that. I

expect you were trying to stick another feather in your hat.’

‘I haven't touched the flaming stuff!’ Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. He turned and looked again at Martrace who looked back at him with large innocent brown eyes.

Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. ‘You should read the label on the tube before you start messing with dangerous products.

Always follow the instructions on the label.’

‘What in heaven's name are you talking about. your stupid witch?’ Mr.

Dicksnoter shouted. clutching the brim of his hat to stop anyone trying to pull it off again. ‘D 'you think I'm so stupid I'd glue this thing to my head on purpose?’

Martrace said. ‘There's a boy down the road who got some Superglue on his finger without knowing it and then he put his finger to his nose.’

Mr. Dicksnoter jumped. ‘What happened to him?’ he spluttered.

‘The finger got stuck inside his nose.’ Martrace said. ‘And he had to go around like that for a week. People kept saying to him. 'Stop picking your nose.'

and he could not do anything about it. He looked an awful fool.’

‘Serve him right.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ‘He shouldn't have put his finger up there in the first place. It is a nasty habit. If all children had

Superglue put on their fingers they'd soon stop doing it.’

Martrace said. ‘Grown-ups do it too. mummy. I saw you doing it yesterday in the kitchen.’

‘That's quite enough from you.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. turning pink.

Mr. Dicksnoter had to keep his hat on all through supper in front of the

television. He looked ridiculous and he stayed very silent.

When he got up to bed, he tried again to get the thing off. and so did his wife. but it would not budge. ‘How am I going to have my shower?’ he demanded.

‘You'll just have to do without it. won't you.’ his wife told him. And later. as she watched her skinny little husband skulking around the bedroom in his purple-striped pajamas with a pork-pie hat on his head. she thought how stupid he looked. Hardly the kind of man a wife dream about. she told herself.

Mr. Dicksnoter discovered that the worst thing about having a permanent hat on his head was having to sleep in it.

It was impossible to lie comfortably on the pillow. ‘Now do stop fussing around.’ his wife said to him after he had been tossing and turning for about an hour. ‘I expect it will be loose by the morning and then it'll slip off easily.’

But it was not lost by the morning, and it would not slip off. So, Ms. Dicksnoter took a pair of scissors and cut the thing off his head. bit by bit. first the top and then the brim. Where the inner band had stuck to the hair all around the sides and back.

She had to chop the hair off right to the skin so that he finished with a bald white ring round his head. like some sort of a monk.

And in the front. where the band had stuck directly to the bare skin. there remained a whole lot of small patches of brown leathery stuff that no amount of washing would get off.

At breakfast, Martrace said to him. ‘You must try to get those bits off your forehead. daddy. It looks as though you have little brown insects crawling about all over you. People will think you've got lice.’

‘Be quiet!’ the father snapped. ‘Just keep your nasty mouth shut. will you!’

Overall, it was a most satisfactory exercise. But it was surely too much to hope that it had taught the father a permanent lesson.

Martrace's parents owned quite a nice house with three bedrooms upstairs. while on the ground floor, there was a dining-room and a living-room, and a kitchen. Her father was a dealer in second-hand cars, and it seemed he did well at it.

‘Sawdust.' he would say proudly. ‘Is one of the great secrets of my success. And it costs me nothing. I get it free from the sawmill.’

‘What do you use it for?’ Martrace asked him.

‘Ha!’ the father said. ‘Wouldn't you like to know?’

‘I don't see how sawdust can help you to sell second-hand cars. daddy.’

‘That's because you're an ignorant little twit.’ the father said. His speech was never very delicate, but Martrace was used to it. She also knew

that he liked to boast, and she would egg him on shamelessly.

‘You must be very clever to find a use for something that costs nothing.’ she said. ‘I wish I could do it.’

‘You couldn't.’ the father said. ‘You're too stupid. But I don’t mind telling young Mike here about it seeing he’ll be joining me on business one day.’ Ignoring Martrace. he turned to his son and spoke. ‘I'm always glad to buy a car when some fool has been crashing the gears so badly, they're all worn out and rattle like mad. I got it cheap. Then all I do is mix a lot of sawdust with the oil in the gearbox and it runs as sweet as a nut.’

‘How long will it run like that before it starts rattling again?’ Martrace asked him.

‘Long enough for the buyer to get a good distance away.’ the father said. grinning. ‘About a hundred miles.’ ‘But that's dishonest. daddy.’ Martrace said. ‘It's cheating.’

‘No one ever got rich being honest.’ the father said.

9

‘Customers are there to be diddled.’

Mr. Dicksnoter was a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty mustache.

He liked to wear jackets with large brightly colored checks, and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green. ‘Now take mileage for instance.’ he went on. ‘Anyone who's buying a secondhand car. The first thing he wants to know is how many miles it has done. Right?’

‘Right.’ the son said.

‘So, I buy an old dump that's got about a hundred and fifty thousand miles on the clock. I got it cheap. But no one's

going to buy it with mileage like that. are they?

And these days you cannot just take the speedometer out and fiddle the numbers back as you used to ten years ago. They have fixed it, so it is impossible to tamper with it unless you are a ruddy watchmaker or something. So, what do I do? I use my brain. Laddie- that's what I do.'

'How?' young Peter asked. fascinated. He seemed to have inherited his father's love of crookery.

'I sit down and say to myself. How can I convert a mileage reading of

one hundred and fifty thousand into only ten thousand without taking the speedometer to pieces? Well. If I were to run the car backward for long enough then obviously that would do it. The numbers would click backward. wouldn't they? But who is going to drive a flaming car in reverse for thousands and thousands of miles? You couldn't do it!'

'Of course, you couldn't.' young Peter said.

'So-o I scratch my head.' the father said. 'I use my brains. When you have been given a fine brain as I have. You must use it. And suddenly. the answer hits me. I tell you. I felt exactly

like that other brilliant person must have felt when he discovered penicillin. 'Eureka!' I cried. 'I've got it!' '

'What did you do. dad?' the son asked him.

'The speedometer.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'Is run off a cable that is coupled up to one of the front wheels. So first I disconnect the cable where it joins the front wheel. Next. I get one of those high-speed electric drills and me couple that up to the end of the cable in such a way that when the drill turns. it turns the cable backward. Did you get me so far? You are following me?'

‘Yes. daddy.’ young Peter said.

‘These drills run at a tremendous speed.’ the father said. ‘So, when I switch on the drill the mileage numbers on the speedo spin backward at a fantastic rate. I can knock fifty thousand miles off the clock in a few minutes with my high-speed electric drill. And by the time I have finished. The car's only done ten thousand and it is ready for sale. 'She's almost new.' I say to the customer. 'She's hardly done ten thou. Belonged to an old lady who only used it once a week for shopping.' ‘

‘Can you turn the mileage back with an electric drill?’ young Peter asked.

‘I'm telling you trade secrets.’ the father said. ‘So, don't you go talking about this to anyone else. You do not want me to put in a jug. do you?’

‘I won't tell a soul.’ the boy said. ‘Do you do this to many cars? Dad?’

‘Every single car that comes through my hands gets the treatment.’ the father said. ‘They all have their mileage cut to under ten thou before they're offered for sale. And to think I invented that all by myself.’ he added proudly. ‘It's made me a mint.’

Martrace. who had been listening closely. said? ‘But daddy. That is even

more dishonest than sawdust. It is disgusting.

You're cheating people who trust you.’

‘If you don't like it then don't eat the food in this house.’ the father said. ‘It's bought with the profits.’

‘It's dirty money.’ Martrace said. ‘I hate it.’

Two red spots appear on the father's cheeks. ‘Who the heck do you think you are.’ he shouted. ‘The Archbishop of Canterbury or something. preaching to me about honesty? You're just an ignorant little squirt who hasn't

the foggiest idea what you're talking about!’

‘Quite right. Harry.’ the mother said. And to Martrace she said. ‘You've got a nerve talking to your father like that. Now keep your nasty mouth shut so we can all watch this program in peace.’

They were in the living room eating their suppers on their knees in front of the telly. The suppers were MOVIE dinners in floppy aluminum containers with separate compartments for the stewed meat. The boiled potatoes and the peas. Ms. Dicksnoter sat munching her meal with her eyes glued to the Am-Jenniean soap opera on the

screen. She was a large woman whose hair was dyed platinum blond-haired person except where you could see the mousy brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy makeup and she had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped all around the body to prevent it from falling out.

‘Mummy.’ Martrace said. ‘Would you mind if I ate my supper in the dining room so I could read my book?’

The father glanced up sharply. ‘I would mind!’ he snapped. ‘Supper is a family gathering and no one leaves the table till it's over!’

‘But we're not at the table.’ Martrace said. ‘We never are.

We are always eating off our knees and watching the telly.

‘What's wrong with watching the telly. may I ask?’ the father said. His voice had suddenly become soft and dangerous.

Martrace did not trust herself to answer him. so, she kept quiet. She could feel the anger boiling up inside her.

She knew it was wrong to hate her parents like this. but she was finding it extremely hard not to do so.

All the reading she had done had given her a view of life that they had

never seen. If only they read a little Dickens or Kipling, they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television.

Another thing. She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she was not.

The anger inside her went on boiling and boiling. and as she lay in bed that night, she decided. She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her.

she would get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or

two would help her to tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy. You must remember that she was still hardly five years old, and it is not easy for somebody as small as that to score points against an all-powerful grown-up. Even so. She was determined to have a go. Her father. after what had happened in front of the telly that evening. was first on her list…

10

Later that day. the news began to spread that the Headmistress had recovered from her fainting-fit and had then marched out of the school building tight-lipped and white in the face.

The next morning, she did not turn up at school. At lunchtime. Mr. Trilby. the Deputy Head. telephoned her house to inquire if she was feeling unwell. There was no answer to the phone.

When school was over. Mr. Trilby decided to investigate further. So, he walked to the house where Miss. Mcfarts lived on the edge of the village. the lovely small red-brick Georgian building is known as The Red House. tucked away in the woods behind the hills.

He rang the bell. No answer.

He knocked loudly. No answer.

He called out. ‘Is anybody at home?’ No answer.

He tried the door and to his surprise found it unlocked. He went in.

The house was silent and there was no one in it. and yet all the furniture was still in place. Mr. Trilby went upstairs to the main bedroom. Here also everything was normal until he started opening drawers and looking into cupboards.

There were no clothes, underclothes, or shoes anywhere.

They had all gone.

She has done a bunk. Mr. Trilby said to himself, and he went away to inform the School Governors that the Headmistress had vanished.

On the second morning. Miss. Darling received by registered post a letter from a firm of local solicitors informing her that the last will of her late father. Dr. Darling. had suddenly and mysteriously turned up. This document revealed that ever since her father's death. Miss. Darling had been the rightful owner of a property on the edge of the village known as The Red House. which until recently had been occupied by Miss Agatha Mcfarts.

They will also show that her father's lifetime savings. Fortunately, we are still safely in the bank. had also been left to her. The solicitor's letter added that if Miss. Darling would kindly call into the office as soon as possible. then the property and the money could be transferred into her name very rapidly.

Miss. Darling did just that. and within a couple of weeks, she had moved into the Red House. the very place in which she had been brought up and where luckily all the family furniture and pictures were still around. From then on. Martrace was a welcome visitor to The Red House every single evening after

school. and a close friendship began to develop between the teacher and the small child.

Back at school. Momentous changes were also taking place. As soon as it became clear that Miss. Mcfarts had completely disappeared from the scene. The excellent Mr. Trilby was appointed Head Teacher in her place. And very soon after that. Martrace was moved up into the top from where Miss. Plimsoll quickly discovered that this amazing child was every bit as bright as Miss. Darling had said.

One evening a few weeks later. Martrace was having tea with

Miss. Darling in the kitchen of The Red House after school as they always did. when Martrace said suddenly. ‘Something strange has happened to me. Miss. Darling.’

‘Tell me about it.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘This morning.’ Martrace said. ‘Just for fun I tried to push something over with my eyes and I couldn't do it. Nothing moved. I did not even feel the hotness building up behind my eyeballs. The power had gone. I think I've lost it completely.’

Miss. Darling carefully buttered a slice of brown bread and put a little strawberry jam on it. ‘I've been expecting something like that to happen.’ she said.

‘You have? Why?’ Martrace asked.

‘Well.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘it's only a guess. but here is what I think. While you were in my class you had nothing to do. nothing to make you struggle. Your enormous brain was going crazy with frustration. It was bubbling and boiling away like mad inside your head. There was tremendous energy bottled up in there with nowhere to go. and somehow or other you were able to

shoot that energy out through your eyes and make objects move. But now things are different. You are in the top form competing against children more than twice your age and all that mental energy is being used up in class. Your brain is for the first time having to struggle and strive and keep busy. which is great. That is only a theory. mind you. and it may be a silly one. but I don't think it's far off the mark.’

‘I'm glad it's happened.’ Martrace said. ‘I wouldn't want to go through life as a miracle-worker.’

‘You've done enough.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I can still hardly believe you made all this happen for me.’

Martrace. who was perched on a tall stool at the kitchen table? ate her bread and jam slowly. She did so love these afternoons with Miss. Darling. She felt completely comfortable in her presence. and the two of them talked to each other as equals.

‘Did you know?' Martrace said suddenly. ‘That the heart of a mouse beats at the rate of six hundred and fifty times a second?’

‘I did not.’ Miss. Darling said smiling. ‘How fascinating. Where did you read that?’

‘In a book from the library.’ Martrace said. ‘And that means it goes so fast you can't even hear the separate beats. It must sound just like a buzz.’

‘It must.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘And how fast do you think a hedgehog's heart beats?’ Martrace asked.

11

‘Tell me.’ Miss. Darling said. smiling again.

‘It's not as fast as a mouse.’ Martrace said. ‘It's three hundred times a minute. But even so. You would not have thought it went as fast as that in a creature that moves so slowly. would you. Miss. Darling?’

‘I certainly wouldn't.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Tell me one more.’

‘A horse.’ Martrace said. ‘That's slow. It's only forty times a minute.’

This child. Miss. Darling told herself. seems to be interested in everything. When one is with her it is impossible to be bored. I love it.

The two of them stayed sitting and talking in the kitchen for an hour or so longer. and then. at about six o'clock. Martrace said goodnight and set out to walk home to her parent's house. which was about an eight-minute journey away. When she arrived at her gate. She saw a large black Mercedes motorcar parked outside. She did not take too much notice of that. There were often strange cars parked outside her father's place. But when she entered the house. She was confronted by a scene of utter chaos. Her mother and father were both in the hall frantically stuffing clothing and various objects into suitcases.

‘What on the earth's going on?’ she cried. ‘What's happening. daddy?’

‘We're off.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. not looking up. ‘We're leaving for the airport in half an hour, so you'd better get packed. Your brother's upstairs already to go. Get a move on. girl! Get going!’

‘Off?’ Martrace cried out. ‘Where to?’

‘Spain.’ the father said. ‘It's a better climate than this lousy country.’

‘Spain!’ Martrace cried. ‘I don't want to go to Spain! I love it here and I love my school!’

‘Just do as you're told and stop arguing.’ the father snapped. ‘I've got enough troubles without messing about with you!’

‘But daddy.’ Martrace began.

‘Shut up!’ the father shouted. ‘We're leaving in thirty minutes! I'm not missing that plane!’

‘But how long for. daddy?’ Martrace cried. ‘When are we coming back?’

‘We aren't.’ the father said. ‘Now beat it! I'm busy!’

Martrace turned away from him and walked out through the open front

door. As soon as she was on the road she began to run. She headed straight back towards Miss. Darling's house, and she reached it in less than four minutes. She flew up the drive and suddenly she saw Miss. Darling in the front garden. standing in the middle of a bed of roses doing something with a pair of clippers. Miss. Darling had heard Martrace's feet racing over the gravel and now she straightened up and turned and stepped out of the rose-bed as the child came running up.

‘My. my!’ she said. ‘What in the world is the matter?’

Martrace stood before her. panting. out of breath. Her small face flushed crimson all over.

‘They're leaving!’ she cried. ‘They've all gone mad and they're filling their suitcases and they're leaving for Spain in about thirty minutes!’

‘Who is?’ Miss. Darling asked quietly.

‘Mummy and daddy and my brother Mike and they say I've got to go with them!’

‘You mean for a holiday?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘Forever!’ Martrace cried. ‘Daddy said we were never coming back!’

There was a brief silence. then Miss. Darling said. ‘Actually

I'm not incredibly surprised.’

‘You mean you knew they were going?’ Martrace cried.

‘Why didn't you tell me?’

‘No. darling.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I did not know they were going.

But the news still doesn't surprise me.’

‘Why?’ Martrace cried. ‘Please tell me why.’ She was still out of breath from the running and the shock of it all.

‘Because of your father.' Miss. Darling said. ‘Is in with a bunch of crooks. Everyone in the village knows that. He is a receiver of stolen cars from all over the country. He's in it deep.’ Martrace stared at her open-mouthed.

Miss. Darling went on. ‘People brought stolen cars to your father's workshop where he changed the number-plates and resprayed the bodies and assorted color and all the rest of it. And now somebody has tipped him off that the police are on to him, and he is doing what

they all do. running off to Spain where they cannot get him. He will have been sending his money out there for years. all ready and waiting for him to arrive.’

They were standing on the lawn in front of the lovely redbrick house with its weathered old red tiles and its tall chimneys. and Miss. Darling still had the pair of garden clippers in one hand. It was a warm golden evening, and a blackbird was singing somewhere nearby.

‘I don't want to go with them!’ Martrace shouted suddenly.

‘I won't go with them.’

‘I'm afraid you must.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘I want to live here with you.’ Martrace cried out. ‘Please let me live here with you!’

‘I only wish you could.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But I'm afraid it's not possible. You cannot leave your parents just because you want to.

They have a right to take you with them.’

‘But what if they agreed?’ Martrace cried eagerly. ‘What if they said yes. Can I stay with you? Would you let me stay with you then?’

Miss. Darling said softly. ‘Yes. that would be heaven.’

‘Well. I think they might!’ Martrace cried. ‘I honestly think they might! They don't care tuppence about me!’ ‘Not so fast.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘We've got to be fast!’ Martrace cried. ‘They're leaving any moment! Come on!’ she shouted. grasping Miss. Darling's hand. ‘Please come with me and ask them! But we will have to hurry! We'll have to run!’

The next moment the two of them were running down the drive together and then out onto the road. and Martrace

was ahead. pulling Miss. Darling after her by her wrist. and it was a wild and wonderful dash they made along the country lane and through the village to the house where Martrace's parents lived. The big black Mercedes was still outside and now its boot, and all its doors were open and Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter and the brother were scurrying around it like ants. piling on the suitcases. as Martrace and Miss. Darling came dashing up.

‘Daddy and mummy!’ Martrace burst out. gasping for breath. ‘I don't want to go with you! I want to stay here and live with Miss.

Darling and she says that I can but only if you permit me! Please say yes! Go on. daddy. say yes!

Say yes. mummy!’

The father turned and looked at Miss. Darling. ‘You're that teacher woman who once came here to see me. aren't you?’ he said. Then he went back to stow the suitcases into the car.

His wife said to him. ‘This one will have to go on the back seat.

There's no more room in the boot.’

‘I would love to have Martrace.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I would look after her

with loving care. Mr. Dicksnoter. and I would pay for everything. She would not cost you a penny. But it was not my idea. It was Martrace's. And I will not agree to take her without your full and willing consent.'

'Come on. Harry.' the mother said. pushing a suitcase into the back seat. 'Why don't we let her go if that's what she wants. It'll be one less to look after.'

'I'm in a hurry.' the father said. 'I've got a plane to catch. If she wants to stay. let her stay. It's fine with me.'

Martrace leaped into Miss. Darling's arms and hugged her. and Miss. Darling hugged her back. and then the mother, father, and brother were inside the car and the car was pulling away with the tires screaming. The brother gave a wave through the rear window. but the other two did not even look back. Miss. Darling was still hugging the tiny girl in her arms and neither of them said a word as they stood there watching the big black car tearing around the corner at the end of the road and disappearing forever into the distance.

The hat itself was one of those flat-topped pork-pie jobs with a Duriez's

feather stuck in the hatband and Mr. Dicksnoter were immensely proud of it. The following morning. just before the father left for his beastly second-hand car garage. Martrace slipped into the cloakroom and got hold of the hat he wore each day to work. She had to stand on her toes and reach up as high as she could with a walking-stick to hook the hat off the peg. and even then, she only just made it. He thought it gave him a rakish daring look.

Especially when he wore it at an angle with his loud checked jacket and green tie.

Martrace. holding the hat in one hand and a thin tube of Superglue in the other. proceeded to squeeze a line of glue very neatly all around the inside rim of the hat. Then she carefully hooked the hat back onto the peg with the walking-stick. She timed this operation very carefully. applying the glue just as her father was getting up from the breakfast table.

Mr. Dicksnoter did not notice anything when he put the hat on. but when he arrived at the garage, he could not get it off. Superglue is immensely powerful stuff. so powerful it will take your skin off if you pull too hard. Mr. Dicksnoter did not want to be scalped so

he had to keep the hat on his head the entire day long. even when putting sawdust in gearboxes and fiddling the mileages of cars with his electric drill. To save face. He adopted a casual attitude hoping that his staff would think that he meant to keep his hat on all day long just for the heck of it. like gangsters do in films.

When he got home that evening, he still could not get the hat off.

‘Don't be silly.’ his wife said. ‘Come here. I'll take it off for you.’

She gave the hat a sharp yank. Mr. Dicksnoter let out a yell that rattled

the windowpanes. ‘Ow-w-w!’ he screamed. ‘Don't do that!

Let us go! You'll take half the skin off my forehead!’

Martrace. nestling in her usual chair. was watching this performance over the rim of her book with some interest.

‘What's the matter. daddy?’ she said. ‘Has your head suddenly swollen or something?’

The father glared at his daughter with deep suspicion. but said nothing. How could he? Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. ‘It must be Superglue. It could not

be anything else. That will teach you to go play around with nasty stuff like that. I expect you were trying to stick another feather in your hat.'

'I haven't touched the flaming stuff!' Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. He turned and looked again at Martrace who looked back at him with large innocent brown eyes.

Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. 'You should read the label on the tube before you start messing with dangerous products.

Always follow the instructions on the label.'

‘What in heaven's name are you talking about. your stupid witch?’ Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. clutching the brim of his hat to stop anyone trying to pull it off again. ‘D'you think I'm so stupid I'd glue this thing to my head on purpose?’

Martrace said. ‘There's a boy down the road who got some Superglue on his finger without knowing it and then he put his finger to his nose.’

Mr. Dicksnoter jumped. ‘What happened to him?’ he spluttered.

‘The finger got stuck inside his nose.’ Martrace said. ‘And he had to go around like that for a week. People kept

saying to him. 'Stop picking your nose.' and he could not do anything about it. He looked an awful fool.’

‘Serve him right.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ‘He shouldn't have put his finger up there in the first place. It is a nasty habit. If all children had Superglue put on their fingers, they'd soon stop doing it.’

Martrace said. ‘Grown-ups do it too. mummy. I saw you doing it yesterday in the kitchen.’

‘That's quite enough from you.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. turning pink.

Mr. Dicksnoter had to keep his hat on all through supper in front of the

television. He looked ridiculous and he stayed very silent.

When he got up to bed, he tried again to get the thing off. and so did his wife. but it would not budge. ‘How am I going to have my shower?’ he demanded.

‘You'll just have to do without it. won't you.’ his wife told him. And later. as she watched her skinny little husband skulking around the bedroom in his purple-striped pajamas with a pork-pie hat on his head. she thought how stupid he looked. Hardly the kind of man a wife dreams about. she told herself.

Mr. Dicksnoter discovered that the worst thing about having a permanent hat on his head was having to sleep in it.

It was impossible to lie comfortably on the pillow. ‘Now do stop fussing around.’ his wife said to him after he had been tossing and turning for about an hour. ‘I expect it will be loose by the morning and then it'll slip off easily.’

But it was not lost by the morning, and it would not slip off.

So, Ms. Dicksnoter took a pair of scissors and cut the thing off his head. bit by bit. first the top and then the brim. Where the inner band had stuck to the

hair all around the sides and back. She had to chop the hair off right to the skin so that he finished with a bald white ring round his head. like some sort of a monk. And in the front. where the band had stuck directly to the bare skin. there remained a whole lot of small patches of brown leathery stuff that no amount of washing would get off.

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At breakfast, Martrace said to him. ‘You must try to get those bits off your forehead. daddy. It looks as though you have little brown insects crawling all over you. People will think you've got lice.’

‘Be quiet!’ the father snapped. ‘Just keep your nasty mouth shut. will you!’

Overall, it was a most satisfactory exercise. But it was surely too much to hope that it had taught the father a permanent lesson.

The hunting- There was comparative calm in the Dicksnoter household for about a week after the Superglue episode. The experience had chastened Mr. Dicksnoter and he seemed temporary

to have lost his taste for boasting and bullying.

Then suddenly he struck again. He had had a dreadful day at the garage and had not sold enough crummy secondhand cars. Many things make a man irritable when he arrives home from work in the evening and a sensible wife will usually notice the storm-signals and will leave him alone until he simmers down.

When Mr. Dicksnoter arrived back from the garage that evening his face was as dark as a thundercloud and somebody was clearly for the high jump soon. His wife recognized the signs immediately and made herself scarce. He then strode into the living room. Martrace

happened to be curled up in an armchair in the corner. absorbed in a book. Mr. Dicksnoter switched on the television. The screen lit up. The program blared. Mr. Dicksnoter glared at Martrace. She had not moved. She had somehow trained herself by now to block her ears to the ghastly sound of the dreaded box. She kept right on reading. and for some reason, this exasperated the father. ‘What is this trash?’ he said. snatching the book from her hands.

His anger was intensified because he saw her getting pleasure from something that was beyond his reach.

‘Don't you ever stop reading?’ He snapped at her.

‘Oh. Hello daddy.’ she said pleasantly. ‘Did you have a good day?’

‘It isn't trash. daddy. It is lovely. It is called The Red Pony. It is by John Steinbeck. an Armenian writer. Why don't you try it? You'll love it.’

‘Filth.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘If it's by an Am-Jenniean it's certain to be filth. That's all they write about.’

‘No daddy. It is beautiful. Honestly, it is. It's about.’

‘I don't want to know what it's about.’ Mr. Dicksnoter barked. ‘I'm fed up

with your reading anyway. Find yourself something useful to do.’ With alarming abruptness. He now began ripping the pages out of the book in handfuls and throwing them in the waste-paper basket.

Martrace froze in horror and complete fear. The father kept going. There seemed little doubt that the man felt jealousy. How dare she. he seemed to be saying with each rip of a page. How dare she enjoy reading books when he could not? How dare she?

‘Then you'll have to buy another one. won't you?’ the father said. still tearing out pages. ‘You'll have to save your pocket-money until there's enough in

the kitty to buy a new one for your precious Ms. Smaith. won't you?' 'That's a library book!' Martrace cried. 'It doesn't belong to me! I have to return it to Ms. Smaith!'

With that, he dropped the now empty covers of the book into the basket and marched out of the room. leaving the telly blaring.

Most children in Martrace's place would have burst into floods of tears. She did not do this. She sat there very still, white, and thoughtful. She seemed to know that neither crying nor sulking ever got anyone anywhere. The only sensible thing to do when you are attacked is. as

Jace once said. to counterattack. The strategy that was now beginning to hatch in her mind depended. however. upon whether Edward's parrot was as good a talker as Edward made out.

Edward was a friend of Martrace's. Martrace's wonderfully subtle mind was already at work devising. hitherto another suitable chastisement for the deadly parent.

He was a small boy of six who lived just around the corner from her. and for days he had been going on about this great talking parrot his father had given him.

So, the following afternoon. as soon as Ms. Dicksnoter had departed in her car for another session of bingo. Martrace set out for Edward's house to investigate. She knocked on his door and asked if he would be kind enough to show her the famous bird. Edward was delighted and led her up to his bedroom where a truly magnificent blue and yellow parrot sat in a tall cage. ‘There it is.’ Edward said. ‘Its name is Chopper.’

‘Make it talk.’ Martrace said.

‘You can't make it talk.’ Edward said. ‘You have to be patient.

It'll talk when it feels like it.’

They hung around. waiting. Suddenly the parrot said. ‘Hullo. hullo. hullo- you- hooo.’ It was exactly like a human voice.

Martrace said. ‘That's amazing! What else can it say?’

‘Rattle my bones!’ the parrot said. giving a wonderful imitation of a spooky voice. ‘Commotion my bones!’ ‘He's always saying that.’ Edward told her.

‘What else can he say?’ Martrace asked.

‘It's fabulous.’ Martrace said. ‘Will you lend him to me just for one

night?’ That was different. Edward thought about it for a few seconds. ‘All right. then.’ he said. ‘If you promise to return him tomorrow.’ ‘That's about it.’ Edward said. ‘But it is pretty amazing don't you think?’

‘Nopper- I don't.’ Edward said. ‘Surely not so-o.’

‘I'll give you all my next week's pocket-money.’ Martrace said.

Martrace staggered back to her own empty house carrying the tall cage in both hands. There was a large fireplace in the dining room, and she now set about wedging the cage up the chimney and out

of sight. This was not so easy. but she managed it in the end.

‘Hullo. hullo. hullo!’ the bird called down to her. ‘Hullo. hullo!’

‘Shut up. you nut!’ Martrace said. and she went out to wash the soot off her hands. ‘Harry!’ cried the mother. turning white. ‘There's someone in the house! I heard a voice!’ The father-the mother. that evening while. The brother and Martrace were having supper as usual in the living room in front of the television. a voice- a whisper came loud and clear from the dining room across the hall. ‘Hullo. hullo. hullo- yoooo hooo.’ it said.

‘So, did I!’ the brother said. Martrace jumped up and switched off the telly. ‘They are.’ the father said. sitting tight.

‘Then go and catch them. Harry!’ hissed the mother. ‘Go out and collar them red-handed!’

‘Sh-hh!’ she said. ‘Pay attention!’ They all stopped eating and sat there very tense. listening.

‘Hullo. hullo. hullo!’ came the voice again.

‘There it is!’ cried the brother.

‘It's burglars!’ hissed the mother. ‘They're in the dining room!’

The father did not move. He seemed in no hurry to dash off and be a hero. His face had turned grey.

‘Get on with it!’ hissed the mother. ‘They're probably after the silver!’

The husband wiped his lips nervously with his napkin.

‘Why don't we all go and look together?’ he said.

‘Come on. then.’ the brother said. ‘Come on. mum.’

‘They're definitely in the dining-room.’ Martrace whispered.

‘I'm sure they are.’

The mother grabbed a poker from the fireplace. The father took a golf club that was standing in the corner. The brother seized a table lamp. ripping the plug out of its socket. Martrace took the knife she had been eating with. and all four of them crept towards the dining-room door. the father keeping well behind the others.

‘Hullo. hullo. hullo.’ came the voice again.

‘Come on!’ Martrace cried and she burst into the room.

Brandishing her knife. ‘Stick 'em up!’ she yelled. ‘We've caught you!’ The others followed her. waving their weapons. Then they stopped. They stared around the room. There was no one there.

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‘There's no one here.’ the father said. relieved.

‘I heard him. Harry!’ the mother shrieked. still quaking. ‘I distinctly heard his voice! So, did you!’

‘It's a ghost.’ Martrace said.

‘Heaven help us!’ cried the mother. clutching her husband round her neck.

‘I'm certain I heard him!’ Martrace cried. ‘He's in here somewhere!’ She began searching behind the sofa and behind the curtains.

Then came the voice once again. soft and spooky this time.

‘Rattle my bones.’ it said. ‘Rattle my bones.’

They all jumped. including Martrace who was a good actor. They stared around the room. There was still no one there.

‘I know it's a ghost!’ Martrace said. ‘I've heard it here before!

This room is haunted! I thought you knew that.’

‘Save us!’ the mother screamed. almost throttling her husband. ‘Did it behave itself?’ Edward asked her.

‘We had a lovely time with it.’ Martrace said. Small eager faces looked up and listened. ‘My parents adored it s0-0.’ ‘I'm getting out of here.’ the father said. greyer than ever now. They all fled. slamming the door behind them. The next afternoon.

Martrace managed to get a sooty and grumpy parrot down from the chimney. and out of the house without

being seen. She carried it through the back door and ran with it to Edward's house. In the middle of the first week of Martrace's first term. Miss. Darling said to the class. ‘I have some important news for you.

so, listen carefully. ‘A word of warning to you all.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘The Headmistress is extremely strict about everything. Make sure your clothes are clean. Your faces are clean, and your hands are clean.

Express or that mean talk- dumb asses- only when spoken to. When did she ask you a question? stand up at once before you answer it.

Never argue with her. Never answer back. Never try to be funny. If you do. you will make her angry.

And when the Headmistress gets angry you had better watch out.’ You are too. Martrace. Put that book down for a moment and pay attention.’ Miss. Darling went on. ‘It is the Headmistress's custom…’

‘To take over the class for one period each week. She does this with every class in the school. and each class has a fixed day and a fixed time. Ours is always at two o'clock on Monday afternoons. proximately after lunch. So tomorrow at two o'clock Miss. Mcfarts

will be taking over from me for one lesson. I intend to be here as well. of course. but only as a silent witness. Is that understood?' 'You can say that again.' Dasey murmured.

Nevertheless, the new game she had invented of punishing one or both each time they were beastly to her made her life bearable.

Being exceedingly small and incredibly young. The only power Martrace had over anyone in her family was brainpower. For sheer cleverness, she could run rings around them all. But the fact remained that any five-year-old girl in any family was always obliged to

do as she was told. however asinine the orders might be.

Thus, she was always forced to eat her evening meals out of MOVIE-dinner-trays in front of the dreaded box. The flicker of the projector…

She always had to stay alone on weekday afternoons. and whenever she was told to shut up. she had to shut up.

Her safety-valve. the thing that prevented her from going around the bend. Was it the fun of devising and dishing out these splendid punishments?

…And the lovely thing was that they seemed to work. at any rate for short

periods. The father became less overconfident and unbearable for several days after receiving a dose of Martrace's magic medicine.

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ they chirruped. ‘I am quite sure.' Miss. Darling said. ‘That she will be testing you on what you are meant to have learned this week. which is your two-timing table. So. I strongly advise you to rub it up when you get home tonight. Get your mother or father to hear you on it.’ ‘Spelling.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘What else will she test us on?’ Somebody asked… 'Try to hark back to everything you have learned these last few days. And one more thing. A jug of

water and glass must always be on the table here when the Headmistress comes in. She never takes a lesson without that. Now, who will be responsible for seeing that it's there?’

‘I will.’ Dasey said at once. ‘Very well. Dasey.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘It will be your job to go to the kitchen and get the jug, fill it with water, and put it on the table here with a clean empty glass just before the lesson starts.’

Arithmetic Martrace longed for her parents to be good and loving and understanding and honorable and intelligent. The fact that they were none

of these things was something she had to put up with. It was not easy to do so.

The parrot-in-the-chimney affair quite definitely cooled both parents down a lot and for over a week they were comparatively civil to their small daughter. But alas. This could not last. The next flare-up came one evening in the sitting room. Mr. Dicksnoter had just returned from work. Martrace and her brother were sitting quietly on the sofa waiting for their mother to bring in the MOVIE dinners on a tray.

The television had not yet been switched on.

In came Mr. Dicksnoter in a loud check suit and a yellow tie. The appalling broad orange-and-green check of the jacket and trousers almost blinded the onlooker.

He looked like a low-grade bookmaker dressed up for his daughter's wedding. and he was incredibly pleased with himself this evening. He sat down in an armchair and rubbed his hands together and addressed his son in a loud voice. ‘Well. my boy.’ he said.

‘Your fathers had a most successful day. He is a lot richer tonight than he was this morning. He has sold no less than five cars. each one at a tidy

profit. Sawdust in the gearboxes. the electric drill on the speedometer cables. a splash of paint here and there and a few other clever little tricks and the idiots were all falling over themselves to buy.'

He fished a bit of paper from his pocket and studied it.

'Listen to the boy.' he said. addressing the son and ignoring Martrace. 'Seeing as you'll be going into this business with me one day. You must know how to add up the profits you make at the end of each day. Get yourself a pad and a pencil and let us see how clever you are.'

The son obediently left the room and returned with the writing materials.

‘Write down these figures.’ the father said. reading from his bit of paper. ‘Car number one was bought by me for two hundred and seventy-eight pounds and sold for one thousand four hundred and twenty-five. Got that?’

The ten-year-old boy wrote the two separate amounts down slowly and carefully.

‘Car number two.' the father went on. ‘Cost me one hundred and eighteen pounds and sold for seven hundred and sixty. Got it?’

‘Yes. dad.’ the son said. ‘I've got that.’

''Car number three cost one hundred and eleven pounds and sold for nine hundred and ninety-nine pounds and fifty pence.’

‘Say that again.’ the son said. ‘How much did it sell for?’

‘Nine hundred and ninety-nine pounds and fifty pence.’ the father said. ‘And that. by the way. is another of my nifty little tricks to diddle the customer. Never ask for a big round figure. Always go just below it. Never say one thousand pounds. Always say nine hundred and

ninety-nine fifty. It sounds much less but it does not. Clever. isn't it?’

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‘Very.’ the son said. ‘You're brilliant. dad.’

‘Car number four cost eighty-six pounds - a real wreck that was - and sold for six hundred and ninety-nine pounds fifty.’

‘Not too fast.’ the son said. writing the numbers down.

‘Right. I've got it.’

‘Car number five cost six hundred and thirty-seven pounds and sold for

sixteen hundred and forty-nine fifty. You got all those figures written down. son?'

'Yes. daddy.' the boy said. crouching over his pad and carefully writing.

'Very well.' the father said. 'Now work out the profit I made on each of the five cars and add up the total. Then you'll be able to tell me how much money your rather brilliant father made altogether today.'

'That's a lot of sums.' the boy said.

'Of course, it's a lot of sums.' the father answered. 'But when you're in a

big business like I am. you've got to be hot stuff at arithmetic. I have practically got a computer inside my head. It took me less than ten minutes to work the whole thing out.'

'You mean you did it in your head. dad?' the son asked. goggling.

'Well. not exactly.' the father said. 'Nobody could do that. But it did not take me long. When you are finished. Tell me what you think my profit was for the day. I've got the final total written down here and I'll tell you if you're right.'

Martrace said quietly. 'Dad. you made exactly four thousand three

hundred and three pounds and fifty pence altogether.’

‘Don't butt in.’ the father said. ‘Your brother and I are busy with high finance.’

‘But dad.’

‘Shut up.’ the father said. ‘Stop guessing and trying to be clever.’

‘Look at your answer. dad.’ Martrace said gently. ‘If you've done it right it ought to be four thousand three hundred and three pounds and fifty pence. Is that what you've got? dad?’

The father glanced down at the paper in his hand. He seemed to stiffen.

He became incredibly quiet. There was silence.

Then he said. ‘Say that again.’

‘Four thousand three hundred and three pounds fifty.’ Martrace said.

There was another silence. The father's face was beginning to go dark red.

‘I'm sure it's right.’ Martrace said.

‘You. you little cheat!’ the father suddenly shouted. pointing at her with his finger. ‘You looked at my bit of paper! You read it off from what I've got written here!’

‘Daddy. I’m on the other side of the room.’ Martrace said.

‘How could I possibly see it?’

‘Don't give me that rubbish!’ the father shouted. ‘Of course, you looked! You must have looked! No one in the world could give the right answer just like that. especially a girl! You are a little cheat. madam. That is what you are! A cheat and a liar!’

At that point. The mother came in carrying a large tray on which were the four suppers. This time it was fish and chips which Ms. Dicksnoter had picked up in the fish and chip shop on her way home

from bingo. Bingo afternoons left her so exhausted both physically and emotionally that she never had enough energy left to cook an evening meal. So, if it was not MOVIE dinners it had to be fish and chips. ‘What are you looking so red in the face about. Harry?’ she said as she put the tray down on the coffee table.

‘Your daughter's a cheat and a liar.’ the father said. taking his plate of fish and placing it on his knees. ‘Turn the telly on and let us not have any more talk.’

The Platinum-Blond Man

Martrace was a little late in starting school. Most children begin Primary

School at five or even just before. but Martrace's parents.

Who wasn't overly concerned one way or the other about their daughter's education? I had forgotten to make the proper arrangements in advance. She was five and a half when she entered the school for the first time.

The village school for younger children was a bleak brick building called Crunchem Hall Primary School. It had about two hundred and fifty pupils aged from five to just under twelve years old. The headteacher. the boss. The supreme commander of this establishment was a

formidable middle-aged lady whose name was Miss. Mcfarts.

Naturally, Martrace was put in the bottom class. where there were eighteen other small boys and girls about the same age as her. Their teacher was called Miss. Darling. and she could not have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four. She had a lovely pale oval Madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light brown. Her body was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over, she would smash into a thousand pieces. like a porcelain figure.

Miss. Jennifer Darling was a mild and quiet person who never raised her

voice and was seldom seen to smile. But there is no doubt she possessed that rare gift of being adored by every small child in her care. She understood the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelms young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders.

Some curious warmth that was almost tangible shone out of Miss. Darling's face when she spoke to a confused and homesick newcomer to the class.

Miss. Mcfarts. the Headmistress. Was something else altogether. She was a gigantic holy terror. a fierce tyrannical

monster who frightened the life out of the pupils and teachers alike. There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance. and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal. When she marched - Miss. Mcfarts never walked. she always marched like a storm-trooper with long strides and arms swinging - when she marched along a corridor you could hear her snorting as she went. and if a group of children happened to be in her path.

She plowed right on through them like a tank. with small people bouncing off her to left and right. Thank

goodness we do not meet many people like her in this world. although they do exist and all of us are likely to come across at least one of them in a lifetime. If you ever do. You should behave as you would if you met an enraged rhinoceros out in the bush - climb up the nearest tree and stay there until it has gone away. This woman. in all her eccentricities and her appearance. is almost impossible to describe. but I intend to make some attempts to do so a little later. Let us leave her for the moment and go back to Martrace and her first day in Miss. Darling's class.

After the usual business of going through all the names of the children. Miss. Darling handed out a brand-new exercise book to each pupil.

‘You have all brought your pencils. I hope.’ She spoke.

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ they chanted.

‘Good. Now, this is the very first day of school for each one of you. It is the beginning of at least eleven long years of schooling that all of you are going to have to go through. And six of those years will be spent right here at Crunchem Hall were. as you know. your Headmistress is Miss. Mcfarts. Let me for your good tell

you something about Miss. Mcfarts. She insists on strict discipline throughout the school. And if you take my advice, you will do your absolute best to behave yourselves in her presence. Never argue with her. Never answer her back. Always do as she says. If you get on the wrong side Miss. Mcfarts can liquidize you like a carrot in a kitchen blender. It is nothing to laugh about. Dasey. Take that grin off your face. All of you will be wise to remember that Miss. Mcfarts deals very severely with anyone who gets out of line in this school.

Have you got the message?'

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ chirruped eighteen eager little voices.

‘I.' Miss. Darling went on. ‘I want to help you to learn as much as possible while you are in this class. That is because I know it will make things easier for you later. For example. By the end of this week, I intend to expect every one of you to know the two-times table by heart. And in a year, I hope you will know all the multiplication tables up to twelve. It will help you enormously if you do. Now then. do any of you happen to have learned the two-times table already?’ Martrace put up her hand. She was the only one.

Miss. Darling looked carefully at the tiny girl with dark hair and a round serious face sitting in the second row. ‘Wonderful.’ she said. ‘Please stand up and recite as much of it as you can.’ Martrace stood up and began to say the two-times table.

When she got to twice twelve out of twenty-four, she did not stop.

She went right on with twice thirteen out of twenty-six. twice fourteen is twenty-eight. twice fifteen is thirty. twice sixteen is.’

‘Stop!’ Miss. Darling said. She had been listening slightly spellbound to

this smooth recital. and now she said. ‘How far can you go?’

‘How far?’ Martrace said. ‘Well. I do not know. Miss. Darling. For quite a long way. I think.’

Miss. Darling took a few moments to let this curious statement sink in. ‘You mean.' she said. ‘That you could tell me what two times twenty-eight is?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘What is it?’

‘Fifty-six. Miss. Darling.’

‘What about something much harder. like two times four hundred and eighty-seven? Could you tell me that?’

‘I think so. yes.’ Martrace said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Why yes. Miss. Darling. I'm fairly sure.’

‘What is it then. two times four hundred and eighty-seven?’

‘Nine hundred and seventy-four.’ Martrace said immediately. She spoke quietly and politely and without any sign of showing off.

Miss. Darling gazed at Martrace with absolute amazement. but when next she spoke, she kept her voice level. ‘That is splendid.’ she said. ‘But of course, multiplying by two is a lot easier than some of the bigger numbers. What about the other multiplication tables? Do you know any of those?’

‘I think so. Miss. Darling. I do.’

‘Which ones. Martrace? How far have you got?’

‘I- I don't quite know.’ Martrace said. ‘I don't know what you mean.’

‘What I mean is do you, for instance, know the three-times table?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘And the four-times?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘Well. How many do you know? Martrace? Do you know up to the twelve-times table?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ ‘What are twelve sevens?’

‘Eighty-four.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling paused and leaned back in her chair behind the plain table that stood in the middle of the floor in front of the class. She was shaken by this exchange but took care not to show it.

She had never come across a five-year-old before. or indeed a ten-year-old. who could multiply with such a facility?

‘I hope the rest of you are listening to this.’ she said to the class. ‘Martrace is an incredibly lucky girl. She has wonderful parents who have already taught her to multiple lots of numbers. Was it your mother? Martrace. who taught you?’

‘No. Miss. Darling. it wasn't.’

‘You must have a great father then. He must be a brilliant teacher.’

‘No. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said quietly. ‘My father did not teach me.’

‘You mean you taught yourself?’

‘I don't quite know.’ Martrace said truthfully. ‘It's just that I don't find it exceedingly difficult to multiply one number by another.’

Miss. Darling took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked again at the small girl with bright eyes standing beside her desk so sensible and solemn. ‘You say you don't find it difficult to multiply one number by another.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Could you try to explain that a little bit?’

‘Oh, dear.’ Martrace said. ‘I'm not sure.’

Miss. Darling waited. The class was silent. all listening.

‘For instance.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘If I asked you to multiply fourteen by nineteen. No. that's too difficult.’

‘It's two hundred and sixty-six.’ Martrace said softly.

Miss. Darling stared at her. Then she picked up a pencil and quickly worked out the sum on a piece of paper. ‘What did you say it was?’ she said. looking up.

‘Two hundred and sixty-six.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling put down her pencil, removed her spectacles, and

began to polish the lenses with a piece of tissue. The class remained quiet. watching her and waiting for what was coming next. Martrace was still standing up beside her desk.

‘Now tell me. Martrace.’ Miss. Darling said. still polishing. ‘Try to tell me exactly what goes on inside your head when you get a multiplication like that to do. You must work it out in some way. but you seem able to arrive at the answer instantly. Take the one you have just done. fourteen multiplied by nineteen.’

‘I. I. I simply put the fourteen down in my head and multiply it by nineteen.’ Martrace said. ‘I'm afraid I

don't know how else to explain it. I've always said to myself that if a little pocket calculator can do it why shouldn't I?'

'Why not indeed.' Miss. Darling said. 'The human brain is an amazing thing.'

'I think it's a lot better than a lump of metal.' Martrace said.

'That's all a calculator is.'

'How right you are.' Miss. Darling said. 'Pocket calculators are not allowed in this school anyway.' Miss. Darling was feeling quite quivery. There was no doubt in her mind that she had met a truly extraordinary mathematical brain. and

words like child-genius and prodigy went flitting through her head. She knew that this sort of wonder does pop up in the world from time to time. but only once or twice in a hundred years. All. Mozart was only five when he started composing for the piano and looking at what happened to him.

‘It's not fair.’ Dasey said. ‘How can she do it and we can't?’

‘Don't worry. Dasey. you'll soon catch up.’ Miss. Darling said. lying through her teeth.

At this point Miss. Darling could not resist the temptation of exploring still

further the mind of this astonishing child. She knew that she ought to be paying some attention to the rest of the class, but she was altogether too excited to let the matter rest.

'Well.' she said. pretending to address the whole class. 'Let us leave sums for the moment and see if any of you have begun to learn to spell. Hands up anyone who can spell cat.'

Three hands went up. They belonged to Dasey. a small boy called Tom and to Martrace. 'Spell cat. Tom.'

Tom spelled it.

Miss. Darling now decided to ask a question that normally she would not have dreamed of asking the class on its first day. ‘I wonder.' she said. ‘Whether any of you three who know how to spell cat has learned how to read a whole group of words when they are strung together in a sentence?’

‘I have.’ Tom said.

‘So have I.’ Dasey said.

Miss. Darling went to the blackboard and wrote with her white chalk the sentence. I have already begun to learn how to read long sentences. She had purposely made it difficult, and she

knew that there were precious few five-year-old around who would be able to manage it.

‘Can you tell me what that says? Tom?’ she asked.

‘That's too hard.’ Tom said.

‘Dasey?’

‘The first word is I.’ Dasey said.

‘Can any of you read the whole sentence?’ Miss. Darling asked. waiting for the ‘yes’ that she felt certain was going to come from Martrace.

‘Yes.’ Martrace said.

‘Go ahead.’ Miss. Darling said.

Martrace read the sentence without any hesitation at all.

‘That is particularly good indeed.’ Miss. Darling said. making the understatement of her life. ‘How much can you read.

Martrace?’

‘I think I can read most things. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said.

‘Although I'm afraid I can't always understand the meanings.’

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Miss. Darling got to her feet and walked smartly out of the room. but was

back in thirty seconds carrying a thick book.

She opened it at random and placed it on Martrace's desk. ‘This is a book of humorous poetry.’ she said. ‘See if you can read that one aloud.’

Smoothly. without a pause and at a nice speed. Martrace began to read:

‘An epicure dining at Crewe-

Found a large mouse in his stew.

cried the waiter. ‘Don't shout…

And wave it about

Or the rest will be wanting one too.’

Several children saw the funny side of the rhyme and laughed. Miss. Darling said. ‘Do you know what an epicure is?

Martrace?’

‘It is dainty with his eating.’ Martrace said.

‘That is correct.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘And do you happen to know what that poetry is called?’

‘It's called ilmenite.’ Martrace said. ‘That's a lovely one.

It's so funny.’

‘It's a famous one.’ Miss. Darling said. picking up the book and returning to her table in front of the class. ‘A witty ilmenite is extremely hard to write.’ she added. ‘They look easy, but they most certainly are not.’

‘I know.’ Martrace said. ‘I've tried quite a few times but mine are never any good.’

‘You have. have you?’ Miss. Darling said. more startled than ever. ‘Well, Martrace. I would very much like to hear one of these ilmenites you say you have written. Could you try to remember one for us?’

‘Well.’ Martrace said. hesitating. ‘I've been trying to make up one about you. Miss. Darling. while we've been sitting here.’

‘About me!’ Miss. Darling cried. ‘Well. We have certainly got to hear that one. haven't we?’

‘I don't think I want to say it. Miss. Darling.’

‘Please tell it.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I promise I won't mind.’

‘I think you will. Miss. Darling. because I have to use your first name to make things rhyme and that's why I don't want to say it.’

‘How do you know my first name?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I heard another teacher calling you by it just before we came in.’

Martrace said. ‘She called you Jenny.’

‘I insist upon hearing this ilmenite.’ Miss. Darling said. smiling one of her rare smiles. ‘Stand up and recite it.’

Reluctantly Martrace stood up and very slowly. very nervously. she recited her ilmenite:

‘The thing we all ask about Jenny Is. 'Surely there cannot be many young girls in the place with so lovely a face?'

The answer to that is. 'Not any!' ‘The whole of Miss. Darling's pale and pleasant face blushed a brilliant scarlet. Then once again she smiled. It was a much broader one this time. a smile of pure pleasure.

‘Why. Thank you. Martrace.’ she said. still smiling. ‘Although it is not true. It is a particularly good ilmenite. Oh, dear. oh, dear. I must try to remember that one.’

From the third row of desks. Dasey said. ‘It's good. I like it.’

‘It's true as well.’ a small boy called Graceie said.

‘Of course, it's true.’ Tom said.

Already the whole class had begun to warm towards Miss. Darling. although yet she had hardly taken any notice of any of them except Martrace.

‘Who taught you to read. Martrace?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I just sort of taught me. Miss. Darling.’

‘And have you read any books all by yourself. any children's books. I mean?’

‘I've read all the ones that are in the public library in Love Street. Miss. Darling.’

‘And did you like them?’

‘I liked some of them very much indeed.’ Martrace said.

‘But I thought others were fairly dull.’

‘Tell me one that you liked.’

‘I liked The Lion. the Witch and the Wardrobe.’ Martrace said. ‘Mr. C. S.

Lewis is a particularly good writer. But he has one failing. There are no funny bits in his books.’

‘You are right there.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘There aren't many funny bits in Mr. Tolkien either.’

Martrace said.

‘Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I do.’ Martrace said. ‘Children are not so serious as grown-ups, and they love to laugh.’

Miss. Darling was astounded by the wisdom of this tiny girl. She spoke. ‘And what are you going to do now that you've read all the children's books?’

‘I am reading other books.’ Martrace said. ‘I borrow them from the library. Ms. Smaith is exceedingly kind to me. She helps me to choose them.’

Miss. Darling was leaning far forward over her worktable and gazing in wonder at the child. She had completely forgotten now about the rest of the class. ‘What other books?’ she murmured.

‘I am very fond of Charles Dickens.’ Martrace said. ‘He makes me laugh a lot. Especially Mr. Pickwick.’

At that moment, the bell in the corridor sounded for the end of class.

There was no doubt in Martrace's mind that this latest display of foulness by her father deserved severe punishment. and as she sat eating her awful fried fish and fried chips and ignoring the television. her brain went to work on various possibilities.

By the time she went up to bed, her mind was made up.

The next morning, she got up early and went into the bathroom, and locked the door. As we already know. Ms. Dicksnoter's hair was dyed a brilliant platinum blond-haired person. very much the same glistening silvery color as a female tightrope walker's tights in a circus. The big dyeing job was done twice a year at the hairdressers. but every month or so in between. Ms. Dicksnoter used to freshen it up by giving it a rinse in the washbasin with something called PLATINUM BLONDE HAIRDYE EXTRA STRONG. This also served to dye the nasty brown hairs that kept growing from the root's underneath. The bottle of

PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA STRONG was kept in the cupboard in the bathroom. and underneath the title on the label were written the words Caution. This is peroxide. Keep away from children. Martrace had read it many times with fascination. Martrace's father had a fine crop of black hair which he parted in the middle and of which he was exceedingly proud. ‘Good strong hair.’ he was fond of saying. ‘Means there's a good strong brain underneath.’

‘Like Shakespeare.’ Martrace had once said to him.

‘Like whom?’

‘Shakespeare. daddy.’

‘Was he brainy?’

‘Very. daddy.’

‘He had masses of hair. did he?’

‘He was bald. daddy.’

To which the father had snapped. ‘If you can't talk sense then shut up.’

Anyway. Mr. Dicksnoter kept his hair looking bright and strong. or so he thought. by rubbing into it every morning copious quantities of a lotion called OIL OF VIOLETS HAIR TONIC. A bottle of this smelly purple mixture always stood on the shelf above the sink in the bathroom

alongside all the toothbrushes. and a very vigorous scalp massage with OIL OF VIOLETS took place daily after shaving was completed. This hair and scalp massage was always. accompanied by loud masculine grunts and heavy breathing and gasps of ‘Ah-hh. That is better! That is the stuff! Rub it right into the roots!’ which could be heard by Martrace in her bedroom across the corridor.

Now. in the early morning privacy of the bathroom. Martrace unscrewed the cap of her father's oil of violets and tipped three-quarters of the contents down the drain. Then she filled the bottled up with

her mother's PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA

STRONG. She carefully left enough of her father's original hair tonic in the bottle so that when she gave it a good shake the whole thing still looked purple. She then replaced the bottle on the shelf above the sink. taking care to put her mother's bottle back in the cupboard.

So far so good.

At breakfast time Martrace sat quietly at the dining-room table eating her cornflakes. Her brother sat opposite her with his back to the door devouring

hunks of bread smothered with a mixture of peanut butter and strawberry jam. The mother was just out of sight around the corner in the kitchen making Mr. Dicksnoter's breakfast which always had to be two fried eggs on fried bread with three pork sausages and three strips of bacon and some fried tomatoes.

At this point, Mr. Dicksnoter came noisily into the room. He was incapable of entering any room quietly. especially at breakfast time. He always had to make his appearance felt immediately by creating a lot of noise and clatter. One could almost hear him saying. ‘It's me! Here I come. the great man

himself. the expert in the house. the wage-earner. the one who makes it possible for all the rest of you to live so well!

Notice me and pay your respects!’

On this occasion, he strode in and slapped his son on the back and shouted. ‘Well, my boy. Your father feels he is in for another great money-making day today at the garage! I have a few little beauties. I am going to flog to the idiots this morning. Where's my breakfast?’

‘It's coming. treasure.’ Ms. Dicksnoter called from the kitchen.

Martrace kept her face bent low over her cornflakes. She did not dare lookup. In the first place, she was not at all sure what she was going to see. And secondly. if she did see what she thought she was going to see. she would not trust herself to keep a straight face. The son was looking directly ahead out of the window stuffing himself with bread and peanut butter and strawberry jam.

The father was just moving round to sit at the head of the table when the mother came sweeping out of the kitchen carrying a huge plate piled high with eggs, sausages, bacon, and tomatoes. She looked up. She caught sight of her

husband. She stopped dead. Then she let out a scream that lifted her right up into the air and she dropped the plate with a crash and a splash onto the floor. Everyone jumped. including Mr. Dicksnoter.

‘What the heck's the matter with you. woman?’ he shouted.

‘Look at the mess you've made on the carpet!’

‘Your hair!’ the mother was shrieking. pointing a quivering finger at her husband. ‘Look at your hair! What’ve you had done to your hair?’

‘What's wrong with my hair for heaven's sake?’ he said.

‘Oh, my Gawd dad. what’ve you had done to your hair?’ the son shouted.

A splendid noisy scene was building up nicely in the breakfast room.

Martrace said nothing. She simply sat there admiring the wonderful effect of her handiwork. Mr. Dicksnoter's fine crop of black hair was now a dirty silver. the color this time of a tightrope walker's tights that had not been washed for the entire circus season.

‘You've. you've. you've dyed it!’ shrieked the mother. ‘Why did you do it.

you fool! It looks frightful! It looks horrendous! You look like a freak!’

‘What the blazes are you all talking about?’ the father yelled. putting both hands to his hair. ‘I most certainly have not dyed it! What do you mean by dyed it? What has happened to it? Or is this some sort of a stupid joke?’ His face was turning pale green. the color of sour apples.

‘You must have dyed it. dad.’ the son said. ‘It's the same color as mum's only much dirtier looking.’

‘Of course, he's dyed it!’ the mother cried. ‘It can't change color all by

itself! What were you trying to do? make yourself look handsome or something? You look like someone's grandmother gone wrong!’

‘Get me a mirror!’ the father yelled. ‘Don't just stand there shrieking at me! Get me a mirror!’

The mother's handbag lay on a chair at the other end of the table. She opened the bag and got out a powder compact that had a small round mirror on the inside of the lid. She opened the compact and handed it to her husband. He grabbed it and held it before his face and in doing so spilled most of the powder

all over the front of his fancy tweed jacket.

‘Be careful!’ shrieked the mother. ‘Now look what you've done! That's my best Elizabeth Arden face powder!’

‘Oh, my Gawd!’ yelled the father. staring into the little mirror. ‘What's happened to me! I look terrible! I look just like you went wrong! I cannot go down to the garage and sell cars like this! How did it happen?’ He stared around the room. first at the mother. then at the son. then at Martrace. ‘How could it have happened?’ he yelled.

‘I imagine. daddy.’ Martrace said quietly. ‘That you weren't looking extremely hard, and you simply took mummy's bottle of hair stuff off the shelf instead of your own.’

‘Of course, that's what happened!’ the mother cried. ‘Well, really Harry. How stupid can you get? Why did you not read the label before you started splashing the stuff all over you! Mine is strong. I am only meant to use one tablespoon of it in a whole basin of water and you have gone and put it all over your head neat! It will take all your hair off in the end! Is your scalp beginning to burn? dear?’

‘You mean I'm going to lose all my hair?’ the husband yelled.

‘I think you will.’ the mother said. ‘Peroxide is an immensely powerful chemical. It's what they put down the lavatory to disinfect the pan only they give it another name.’

‘What are you saying!’ the husband cried. ‘I'm not a lavatory pan! I don't want to be disinfected!’

‘Even diluted as I use it.’ the mother told him. ‘It makes a good deal of my hair fall out. so, goodness knows what is going to happen to you. I'm surprised it

didn't take the whole of the top of your head off!’

‘What intend to I do?’ wailed the father. ‘Tell me quick what to do before it starts falling out!’

Martrace said. ‘I'd give it a good wash. dad. if I, were you. with soap and water. But you'll have to hurry.’

‘Will that change the color back?’ the father asked anxiously.

‘Of course, it won't. you tweet.’ the mother said.

‘Then what do I do? I can't go around looking like this forever?’

‘You'll have to have it dyed black.’ the mother said. ‘But wash it first or there won't be any there to die.’

‘Right!’ the father shouted. springing into action. ‘Get me an appointment with your hairdresser this instant for a hair-dying job! Tell them it is an emergency! They must boot someone else off their list! I'm going upstairs to wash it now!’ With that, the man dashed out of the room and Ms. Dicksnoter. sighing deeply. went to the telephone to call the beauty parlor.

‘He does do some pretty silly things now and again. doesn't he? mummy?’ Martrace said.

The mother. dialing the number on the phone. said. ‘I'm afraid men are not always quite as clever as they think they are. You will learn that when you get a bit older. my girl.’

Miss. Darling

Martrace was a little late in starting school. Most children begin Primary School at five or even just before. but Martrace's parents.

Who wasn't overly concerned one way or the other about their daughter's education? I had forgotten to make the proper arrangements in advance. She was

five and a half when she entered the school for the first time.

The village school for younger children was a bleak brick building called Crunchem Hall Primary School. It had about two hundred and fifty pupils aged from five to just under twelve years old. The headteacher. the boss. The supreme commander of this establishment was a formidable middle-aged lady whose name was Miss. Mcfarts.

15

Naturally, Martrace was put in the bottom class. where there were eighteen other small boys and girls about

the same age as her. Their teacher was called Miss. Darling. and she could not have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four. She had a lovely pale oval Madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light brown. Her body was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over, she would smash into a thousand pieces. like a porcelain figure.

Miss. Jennifer Darling was a mild and quiet person who never raised her voice and was seldom seen to smile. But there is no doubt she possessed that rare gift of being adored by every small child in her care.

She understood the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelms young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders.

Some curious warmth that was almost tangible shone out of Miss. Darling's face when she spoke to a confused and homesick newcomer to the class.

There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance. and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal. Miss. Mcfarts. the Headmistress. was

something else altogether. She was a gigantic holy terror.

a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened life out of the

pupils and teachers alike. When she marched - Miss. Mcfarts never walked. she always marched like a storm-trooper with long strides and arms swinging - when she marched along a corridor you could hear her snorting as she went. and if a group of children happened to be in her path. she plowed right on through them like a tank. with small people bouncing off her to left and right. This woman. in all her eccentricities and her appearance.

It is almost impossible to designate. but I intend to make some attempts to do so a little later. Let us leave her for the moment and go back to Martrace and her first day in Miss. Darling's class.

After the usual business of going through all the names of the children. Miss. Darling handed out a brand-new exercise book to each scholar. Thank goodness- we do not meet many people like her in this world. although they do exist and all of us are likely to come across at least one of them in a lifetime. If you ever do. You should behave as you would if you met an enraged rhinoceros

out in the bush - climb up the nearest tree and stay there until it has gone away.

‘You have all brought your pencils. I hope.’ she said. Now, this is the very first day of school for each one of you. It is the beginning of at least eleven long years of schooling that all of you are going to have to go through.

And six of those years will be spent right here at Crunchem Hall were. as you know. your Headmistress is Miss. Mcfarts. Let me for your good tell you something about Miss. Mcfarts.

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ they chanted.

‘Good. She insists on strict discipline throughout the school. And if you take my advice, you will do your absolute best to behave yourselves in her presence. Never argue with her.

Never answer her back. Always do as she says. If you get on the wrong side Miss. Mcfarts can liquidize you like a carrot in a kitchen blender. It is nothing to laugh about. Dasey. Take that grin off your face. All of you will be wise to remember that Miss. Mcfarts deals very-very- severely with anyone who gets out of line in this school. Have you got the message?’

‘Certainly. Miss. Darling.’ chirruped eighteen eager little voices.

‘I.' Miss. Darling went on. ‘I want to help you to learn as much as possible while you are in this class.

That is because I know it will make things easier for you later. For example. By the end of this week, I intend to expect every one of you to know the two-times table by heart. And in a year, yours truly hopes’ you will know- this all the reproduction tables up to twelve. It will help you enormously if you do. Now then. do any of you happen to have learned the two-times table already?’

Martrace put up her hand. She was the only one.

Miss. Darling looked carefully at the tiny girl with dark hair and a round serious face sitting in the second row. ‘Wonderful.’ she said. ‘Please stand up and recite as much of it as you can.’ Martrace stood up and began to say the two-times table.

When she got to twice twelve out of twenty-four, she did not stop.

She went right on with twice thirteen out of twenty-six. twice fourteen is twenty-eight. twice fifteen is thirty. twice sixteen is.’

‘How far?’ Martrace said. ‘Well. I do not know. Miss.

Darling. For quite a long way. I think.’ ‘Stop!’ Miss. Darling said. She had been listening slightly spellbound to this smooth recital. and now she said. ‘How far can you go?’

Miss. Darling took a few moments to let this curious statement sink in. ‘You mean.' she said. ‘That you could tell me what two times twenty-eight is?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘What is it?’

‘Fifty-six. Miss. Darling.’

‘What about something much harder. like two times four hundred and eighty-seven? Could you tell me that?’

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‘Are you sure?’

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‘What is it then. two times four hundred and eighty-seven?’

‘Nine hundred and seventy-four.’ Martrace said immediately. She spoke quietly and politely and without any sign of showing off.

Miss. Darling gazed at Martrace with absolute amazement. but when next she spoke; she kept her voice level. ‘That is splendid.’ she said. ‘But of course, multiplying by two is a lot easier than some of the bigger numbers. What about the other multiplication tables? Do you know any of those?’

‘I think so. Miss. Darling. I do.’

‘Which ones. Martrace? How far have you got?’

‘I. I don't quite know.’ Martrace said. ‘I don't know what you mean.’

‘What I mean is do you, for instance, know the three-times table?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ ‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘And the four-times?’

‘Well. How many do you know? Martrace? Do you know up to the twelve-times table?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ ‘What are twelve sevens?’

‘Eighty-four.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling paused and leaned back in her chair behind the plain table that stood in the middle of the floor in front of the class. She was shaken by this exchange but took care not to show it. She had never come across a five-year-old

before. or indeed a ten-year-old. who could multiply with such a facility?

‘I hope the rest of you are listening to this.’ she said to the class. ‘Martrace is an incredibly lucky girl. She has wonderful parents who have already taught her to multiple lots of numbers. Was it your mother? Martrace. who taught you?’

‘No. Miss. Darling. it wasn't.’

‘You must have a great father then. He must be a brilliant teacher.’

‘No. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said quietly. ‘My father did not teach me.’

‘You mean you taught yourself?’

‘I don't quite know.’ Martrace said truthfully. ‘It's just that I don't find it exceedingly difficult to multiply one number by another.’

Miss. Darling took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked again at the small girl with bright eyes standing beside her desk so sensible and solemn. ‘You say you don't find it difficult to multiply one number by another.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Could you try to explain that a little bit?’

‘Oh, dear.’ Martrace said. ‘I'm not sure.’

Miss. Darling waited. The class was silent. all listening.

‘Two hundred and sixty-six.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling put down her pencil, removed her spectacles, and began to polish the lenses with a piece of tissue. The class remained quiet. watching her and waiting for what was coming next. Martrace was still standing up beside her desk.

‘For instance.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘If I asked you to multiply fourteen by nineteen. No. that's too difficult.’

‘It's two hundred and sixty-six.’ Martrace said softly.

Miss. Darling stared at her. Then she picked up a pencil and quickly worked out the sum on a piece of paper. ‘What did you say it was?’ she said. looking up.

‘I. I. I simply put the fourteen down in my head and multiply it by nineteen.’ Martrace said. ‘I'm afraid I don't know how else to explain it. I've always said to myself that if a little pocket calculator can do it why shouldn't I?’

‘Now tell me. Martrace.’ Miss. Darling said. still polishing. ‘Try to tell me exactly what goes on inside your head

when you get a multiplication like that to do. You must work it out in some way. but you seem able to arrive at the answer instantly. Take the one you have just done. fourteen multiplied by nineteen.'

'Why not indeed.' Miss. Darling said. 'The human brain is an amazing thing.'

'I think it's a lot better than a lump of metal.' Martrace said.

'That's all a calculator is.'

'How right you are yen.'' Miss. Darling said. 'Pocket calculators are not allowed in this school anyway.' Miss. At this point Miss. Darling could not resist

the temptation of exploring still further the mind of this astonishing child. She knew that she ought to be paying some attention to the rest of the class, but she was altogether too excited to let the matter rest.

Darling was feeling quite quivery. There was no doubt in her mind that she had met a truly extraordinary mathematical brain. and words like child-genius and prodigy went flitting through her head. She knew that this sort of wonder does pop up in the world from time to time. but only once or twice in a hundred years.

~*~

Mozart was only five when he started composing for the piano and looking at what happened to him.

‘It's not fair.’ Dasey said. ‘How can she do it and we can't?’

‘Don't worry. Dasey. you'll soon catch up.’ Miss. Darling said. lying through her teeth.

‘Well.’ she said. pretending to address the whole class. ‘Let us leave sums for the moment and see if any of you have begun to learn to spell. Hands up anyone who can spell cat.’

Three hands went up. They belonged to Dasey. a small boy called Tom and to Martrace. ‘Spell cat. Tom.’

Tom spelled it.

Miss. Darling now decided to ask a question that normally she would not have dreamed of asking the class on its first day. ‘I wonder.' she said. ‘Whether any of you three who know how to spell cat has learned how to read a whole group of words when they are strung together in a sentence?’

‘I have.’ Tom said.

‘So have I.’ Dasey said.

Miss. Darling went to the blackboard and wrote with her white chalk the sentence. I have already begun to learn how to read long sentences. She had purposely made it difficult, and she knew that there were precious few five-year-old around who would be able to manage it.

‘Can you tell me what that says? Tom?’ she asked.

‘That's too hard.’ Tom said.

‘Dasey?’

‘The first word is- I.’ Dasey said.

‘Can any of you read the whole sentence?’ Miss. Darling asked. waiting

for the ‘yes’ that she felt certain was going to come from Martrace.

‘Certainly.’ Martrace said.

‘Go ahead.’ Miss. Darling said.

Martrace read the sentence without any hesitation at all.

‘That is particularly good indeed.’ Miss. Darling said. making the understatement of her life. ‘How much can you read.

Martrace?’

‘I think I can read most things. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said.

‘Although I'm afraid I can't always understand the meanings.’

Miss. Darling got to her feet and walked smartly out of the room. but was back in thirty seconds carrying a thick book.

She opened it at random and placed it on Martrace's desk. ‘This is a book of humorous poetry.’ she said. ‘See if you can read that one aloud.’

Smoothly. without a pause and at a nice speed. Martrace began to read:

‘An epicure dining at Crewe-

Found a large mouse in his stew.

cried the waiter. ‘Don't shout

And wave it about or the rest will be wanting one too.’

Then Martrace- rips off-It happened in Physics. reading a Library art book under the desk. I turned a page and fell for an older man. and anonymous at that.

hardly ideal - he was four hundred and forty-five.

I was fourteen.

‘Eureka!’ streaked each thought (I prayed no-one would hear) and Paradise all term was page 179 (I prayed no-one would guess). Of course-

my fingers. sticky with toffee and bliss. failed to entice him from his century; his cool hoary stare fastened me firmly in mine. I got six overdues.

suspension of borrowing rights- and a D in Physics.

But had by heart what Archimedes proves.

Ten years later I married:

A European with cool grey eyes.

…A mustache.

…Pigskin gloves.

Several children saw the funny side of the rhyme and laughed. Miss.

Darling said. ‘Do you know what an epicure is? Martrace?’

‘It is dainty with his eating.’ Martrace said.

‘That is correct.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘And do you happen to know what that poetry is called?’

‘It's called ilmenite.’ Martrace said. ‘That's a lovely one.

…It's so funny.’

‘It's a famous one.’ Miss. Darling said. picking up the book and returning to her table in front of the class. ‘A witty ilmenite is extremely hard to write.’ she

added. ‘They look easy, but they most certainly are not.’

‘I know.’ Martrace said. ‘I've tried quite a few times but mine are never any good.’

‘You have. have you?’ Miss. Darling said. more startled than ever. ‘Well, Martrace. I would very much like to hear one of these ilmenites you say you have written. Could you try to remember one for us?’

‘Well.’ Martrace said. hesitating. ‘I've been trying to make up one about you. Miss. Darling. while we've been sitting here.’

‘About me!’ Miss. Darling cried. ‘Well. We have certainly got to hear that one. haven't we?’

‘I don't think I want to say it. Miss. Darling.’

‘Please tell it.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I promise I won't mind.’

‘I think you will. Miss. Darling. because I have to use your first name to make things rhyme and that's why I don't want to say it.’

‘How do you know my first name?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I heard another teacher calling you by it just before we came in.’

Martrace said. ‘She called you Jenny.’

‘I insist upon hearing this ilmenite.’ Miss. Darling said. smiling one of her rare smiles. ‘Stand up and recite it.’

Reluctantly Martrace stood up and very slowly. very nervously. she recited her ilmenite:

‘The thing we all ask about Jenny

Is. 'Surely there cannot be many

Young girls in the place

With so lovely a face?'

The answer to that is. 'Not any!'

‘Then she ripped off- faster-

I want to be a passenger in your car again and shut my eyes while you sit at the wheel. awake and assured in your private world. seeing all the lines on the road ahead, down a long stretch of empty highway without any other face's insight.

I want to be a passenger in your car again and put my life back in your hands.

The whole of Miss. Darling's pale and pleasant face blushed a brilliant scarlet. Then once again she smiled. It

was a much broader one this time. a smile of pure pleasure.

‘Why. Thank you. Martrace.’ she said. still smiling. ‘Although it is not true. It is a particularly good ilmenite. Oh, dear. oh, dear. I must try to remember that one.’

From the third row of desks. Dasey said. ‘It's good. I like it.’

‘It's true as well.’ a small boy called Graceie said.

‘Of course, it's true.’ Tom said.

Already the whole class had begun to warm towards Miss. Darling.

although yet she had hardly taken any notice of any of them except Martrace.

‘Who taught you to read. Martrace?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I just sort of taught me. Miss. Darling.’

‘And have you read any books all by yourself. any children's books. I mean?’

‘I've read all the ones that are in the public library in Love Street. Miss. Darling.’

‘And did you like them?’

‘I liked some of them very much indeed.’ Martrace said.

‘But I thought others were fairly dull.’

‘Tell me one that you liked.’

‘I liked The Lion. the Witch and the Wardrobe.’ Martrace said. ‘Mr. C. S. Lewis is a particularly good writer. But he has one failing. There are no funny bits in his books.’

‘You are right there.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘There aren't many funny bits in Mr. Tolkien either.’

Martrace said.

‘Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I do.’ Martrace said. ‘Children are not so serious as grown-ups, and they love to laugh.’

Miss. Darling was astounded by the wisdom of this tiny girl. She spoke. ‘And what are you going to do now that you've read all the children's books?’

‘I am reading other books.’ Martrace said. ‘I borrow them from the library. Ms. Smaith is exceedingly kind to me. She helps me to choose them.’

Miss. Darling was leaning far forward over her worktable and gazing in wonder at the child. She had completely forgotten now about the rest of the class. ‘What other books?’ she murmured.

‘I am very fond of Charles Dickens.’ Martrace said. ‘He makes me laugh a lot. Especially Mr. Pickwick.’

At that moment, the bell in the corridor sounded for the end of class. Immediately after lunch. She dashed off to the kitchen and found one of Mcfarts's famous jugs. It was a large bulging thing made of blue-glazed pottery. Dasey filled it half-full of water and carried it. together with glass. into the classroom

and set it on the teacher's table. The classroom was still empty. Quick as a flash. Dasey got her pencil-box from her satchel and slid open the lid just a tiny bit. The newt was lying quite still. With great care. She held the box over the neck of the jug and pulled the lid fully open and tipped the newt in. There was a plop as it landed in the water. then it thrashed around wildly for a few seconds before settling down. And now. to make the newt feel more at home. Dasey decided to give it all the pondweed from the pencil-box as well. Then she read- on Time is a rhyme- just another nickel and dime- no more wasted time… that one I

love… Love is not something you can buy it is only earned. What is love and In-love she asked- Stop taking you piss-head- you do not know what love and fu*king is… do you… then you are not that smart, are you…? Don’t you think this girl has my story… in why she asked the teacher…? Um- she looked at her like not now…

The deed was done. Everything was ready. Dasey put her pencils back into the damp pencil box and returned it to its correct place on her desk. Then she went out and joined the others in the playground until it was time for the lesson to begin.

The Mcfarts in the interval. Miss. Darling left the classroom and headed straight for the Headmistress's study. She felt wildly excited. She had just met a small girl who possessed it. or so it seemed to her. quite extraordinary qualities of brilliance. There had not been time yet to find out exactly how brilliant the child was. but Miss. Darling had learned enough to realize that something had to be done about it as soon as possible. It would be ridiculous to leave a childlike that stuck in the bottom form.

Normally Miss. Darling was terrified of the Headmistress and kept far away from her. but at this moment she

felt ready to take on anybody. She knocked on the door of the dreaded private study.

‘Enter!’ boomed the deep and dangerous voice of Miss. Mcfarts. Miss. Darling went in.

Now, most headteachers are chosen because they possess several fine qualities. They understand children and they have the children's best interests at heart. They are sympathetic. They are fair and they are deeply interested in education. Miss. Mcfarts possessed none of these qualities and how she ever got her present job was a mystery.

She was above all the most formidable female. She had once been a famous athlete. and even now the muscles were still clearly in evidence. Looking at her. you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half. You could see them in the bull-neck. on the big shoulders. in thick arms. in the sinewy wrists and the commanding legs. Her face. I am afraid. was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy forever?

She had an obstinate chin. a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes. And as for her clothes. The massive thighs which emerged from out of the smock

were encased in a pair of extraordinary breeches. bottle-green in color and made of coarse twill… they were. to say the least. extremely odd. She always had a brown cotton smock which was pinched in around the waist with a wide leather belt. The belt was fastened in front with an enormous silver buckle. These breeches reached just below the knees and from there on down she sported green stockings with turn-up tops. which displayed her calf muscles to perfection?

On her feet, she wore flat-heeled brown brogues with leather flaps. She looked. in short. more like an eccentric and bloodthirsty follower of the

staghounds than the principal of a nice school for children.

When Miss. Darling entered the study. Miss. Mcfarts was standing beside her huge desk with a look of scowling impatience on her face. ‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ she said. ‘What is it you want? You are looking very flushed and flustered this morning. What is the matter with you? Have those little stinkers been flicking spitballs at you?’

‘No. Headmistress. Nothing like that.’

‘Well. What is it then? Get on with it. I'm a busy woman.’ As she spoke.

she reached out and poured herself a glass of water from a jug that was always on her desk.

‘There is a little girl in my class called Martrace Dicksnoter.’ Miss. Darling began.

A terrific bargain. Yes. I liked Dicksnoter. A real pillar of our civilization. ‘That's the daughter of the man who owns Dicksnoter Motors in the village.’ Miss. Mcfarts barked. She hardly ever spoke in a normal voice. She either barked or shouted. ‘An excellent person. Dicksnoter.’ she went on. ‘I was in there only days gone by. He sold me a car a 1919 Bens. Almost new only make on the

one door. Only done five thousand miles. The former owner was an old lady who took it out once a year at the most. He told me the daughter was a bad lot though. He said to watch her. He asked if anything bad ever happened in the school. it was certain to be his daughter who did it. I have not met the little brat yet. but she will know about it when I do. Her father said she's a real wart.' 'Oh no. Headmistress. that can't be right!' Miss. Darling howled.

Nasty little worm. I will be bound. 'Oh yes. Miss. Darling. its darn well is right! In fact. Now I have come to think of it. I will bet it was she who put that stink-

bomb under my desk here first thing this morning. The place stank like a sewer! Of course, it was her! I intend to have her for that. you see if I do not! What does she look like? I have discovered. Miss. Darling. during my lengthy career as a teacher that a bad girl is a far more dangerous creature than a bad boy. What is more. They are much harder to squash. Squashing a bad girl is like trying to squash a bluebottle. You bang down on it and the darn thing is not there.

Nasty dirty things. little girls are. Glad I never was one.'

'Oh. but you must have been a little girl once.

Principal. Surely you were.’

‘But Headmistress. the child only arrived at school this morning and came straight to the classroom.’

‘Thank you for suggesting it. Do not argue with me. for heaven's sake. woman! This little brute Martrace or whatever her name is has stink-bombed my study! There's no doubt about it!’

‘Not for long anyway.’ Miss. Mcfarts barked. grinning.

‘I became a woman very quickly.’

She is completely off her rocker. Miss. Darling told herself. She is as barmy as a bedbug. Miss. Darling stood

resolutely before the Headmistress. For once she was not going to be browbeaten. ‘I must tell you. Principal.’ she said. ‘That you are completely mistaken about Martrace putting a stink bomb under your desk.’

‘I am never mistaken. Miss. Darling!’

‘But I didn't suggest it. Principal.’

‘Of course, you did! Now, what do you want? Miss. Darling?

Why are you wasting my time?’

‘No. no!’ Miss. Darling cried out. ‘Martrace is a genius.’

At the mention of this word. Miss. Mcfarts's face turned purple and her whole body seemed to swell up like a bullfrog's. ‘A genius!’ she shouted.

The Headmistress... I have extraordinary things to report about the child. May I please tell you what happened in class just now?’

‘‘What piffle is this you are talking about. madam? You must be out of your mind! I have her father's word for it that the child is a gangster!’

‘I came to you to talk about Martrace I suppose she set fire to your

skirt and scorched your knickers!’ Miss. Mcfarts snorted.

‘Her father is wrong. Principal.’

‘Don't be a twerp. Miss. Darling! You have met the little beast for only half an hour and her father has known her all her life!’

But Miss. Darling was determined to have her say and she now began to describe some of the amazing things Martrace had done with arithmetic.

‘So, she's learned a few tables by heart. has she?’ Miss. Mcfarts barked. ‘My dear woman. that does not make her

a genius! It makes her a parrot!' 'But Headmistress she can read.'

'So, can I.' Miss. Mcfarts snapped.

'It is my opinion.' Miss. Darling said. 'That Martrace should be taken out of my form and placed directly in the top form with the eleven-year-olds.'

'Ha ha ha!' snorted Miss. Mcfarts. 'So, you want to get rid of her. do you? So, you cannot handle her? So now you want to unload her on to the wretched Miss. Plimsoll at the top from where she will cause even more chaos?'

‘No. no!’ cried Miss. Darling. ‘That is not my reason at all!’

‘Oh. yes, it is!’ shouted Miss. Mcfarts. ‘I can see right through your little plot. madam! And my answer is no! Martrace stays where she is, and it is up to you to see that she behaves herself.’ Miss. Darling stood there helpless before this great, red-necked giant. There was a lot more she would have liked to have said but she knew it was useless. She said softly. ‘Very well. then. It is up to you.

Principal.’ ‘But- but- but Headmistress. please.’ ‘You're darn right it's up to me!’ Miss. Mcfarts bellowed. ‘And don't forget.

Madam that we are dealing here with a little viper who put a stink bomb under my desk.'

'She did not do that. Principal!'

-Great Scott. I know it is heavy- I am not having a little five-year-old brigand sitting with the senior girls and boys in the top form.

Whoever heard of such a thing!' 'Not another word!' shouted Miss. Mcfarts. 'And in any case. I have a rule in this school that all youngsters remain in their age groups regardless of ability.

'Of course, she did it.' Miss. Mcfarts boomed. 'And I'll tell you what. I

wish to heaven I was still allowed to use the birch and belt as I did in the good old days! I'd have roasted Martrace's bottom for her so she couldn't sit down for a month!’

Miss. Darling turned and walked out of the study feeling depressed but by no means defeated. I am going to do something about this child. she told herself. I do not know what it will be like. but I intend to find a way to help her in the end.

16

The Parents

‘There is no point.' she said. ‘If you are sitting in class doing nothing while I am teaching the rest of the form the two times table and how to spell cat, rat, and mouse. So, during each lesson, I intend to give you one of these textbooks to study. At the end of the lesson, you can come up to me with your questions if you have any and I intend to try to help you. How does that sound?’

When Miss. Darling emerged from the Headmistress's study.

most of the children were outside on the playground. Her first move was to go around to the various teachers who

taught the senior class and borrow many textbooks from them.

Algebra books, geometry. French. English Literature and the like. Then she sought out Martrace and called her into the classroom.

‘Thank you. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘That sounds fine.’

‘I am sure.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That we'll be able to get you moved into a much higher form later. but for the moment the

Principal wishes you to stay where you are.’

‘Very well. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘Thank you so much for getting those books for me.’

What a nice child she is. Miss. Darling thought. I do not care what her father said about her. She seems incredibly quiet and gentle to me. And not a bit stuck up despite her brilliance.

She hardly seems aware of it.

So, when the class reassembled. Martrace went to her desk and began to study a textbook on geometry which Miss. Darling had given her. The teacher kept half an eye on her all the time and noticed that the child very soon became deeply

absorbed in the book. She never glanced up once during the entire lesson.

Miss. Darling. meanwhile. was making another decision. She decided that she would go herself and have a secret talk with Martrace's mother and father as soon as possible. She simply refused to let the matter rest where it was. The whole thing was ridiculous.

She could not believe that the parents were unaware of their daughter's remarkable talents. All. Mr. Dicksnoter was a successful motor-car dealer, so she presumed that he was an intelligent man himself. In any event. parents never underestimated the abilities of their

children. Plus. Now Miss. Darling's hopes began to expand even further. She started wondering whether permission might not be sought from her parents for her to give private tuition to Martrace after school. Quite the reverse.

Sometimes it was unbearable for a teacher to convince the proud father or mother that their beloved offspring was a complete nitwit. Miss. Darling felt confident that she would have no difficulty in convincing Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter that Martrace was something incredibly special indeed. The trouble was going to be to stop them from getting over-wholehearted.

She would be late. between nine and ten o'clock. when Martrace was sure to be in bed. The prospect of coaching a child as bright as this appealed enormously to her professional instinct as a teacher. And suddenly she decided that she would go and call on Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter that very evening.

And that is precisely what she did. Having the address from the school records. Miss. Darling set out to walk from her own home to the Dicksnoter's house shortly after nine. She found the house in a pleasant street where each smallish building was separated from its neighbors by a bit of garden. It was a

modern brick house that could not have been cheap to buy and the name on the gate said COSY NOOK.

Nosey cook might have been better. Miss. Darling thought. She was given to playing with words in that way. She walked up the path and rang the bell. and while she stood waiting, she could hear the television blaring inside.

‘I'm not.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘And please forgive me for butting in on you like this. I am Martrace's teacher at the school and I must have a word with you and your wife.’

‘Got into trouble already. has she?’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. blocking the doorway. ‘Well. She is your responsibility from now on. You'll have to deal with her.’

The door was opened by a small ratty-looking man with a thin ratty mustache who was wearing a sports-coat that had an orange and red stripe in the material. ‘Yes?’ he said. peering out at Miss.

Darling. ‘If you're selling raffle tickets, I don't want any.’

‘Miss. Darling said- She is in no trouble at all...' ‘I have come with good news about her. Fairly startling news. Mr.

Dicksnoter. Do you think- I may come in for a few minutes and talk to you about

Martrace?'

'We are right in the middle of watching one of our favorite programs.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'This is the most inconvenient. Why don't you come back some other time?'

That shook Mr. Dicksnoter. Miss. Darling began to lose patience. 'Mr. Dicksnoter.' she said. 'If you think some rotten MOVIE programmed is more important than your daughter's future. then you ought not to be a parent! Why

don't you switch the darn thing off and listen to me!’

He was not used to being spoken to in this way. He peered carefully at the slim frail woman who stood so resolutely out on the porch. ‘Oh, very well then.’ he snapped. ‘Come on in and let us get it over with.’ Miss. Darling stepped briskly inside.

‘Ms. Dicksnoter isn't going to thank you for this.’ the man said as he led her into the sitting-room where a large platinum-blonde woman was gazing rapturously at the MOVIE screen.

‘Who is it?’ the woman said. not looking around.

‘Some schoolteachers.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘She says she's got to talk to us about Martrace.’ He crossed to the MOVIE set and turned down the sound but left the picture on the screen.

‘Don't do that. Harry!’ Ms. Dicksnoter cried out. ‘Willard is just about to propose to Angelica!’

‘You can still watch it while we're talking.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘This is Martrace's teacher. She says she's got some sort of news to give us.’

‘My name is Jennifer Darling.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘How do you do. Ms. Dicksnoter.’

Ms. Dicksnoter glared at her and spoke. ‘What's the trouble then?’

Nobody invited Miss. Darling to sit down so she chose a chair and sat down anyway. ‘This.' she said. ‘Was your daughter's first day at school.’

‘We know that.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ratty about Missing her program. ‘Is that all you came to tell us?’

Miss. Darling stared hard into the other woman's wet grey eyes. and she allowed the silence to hang in the air until

Ms. Dicksnoter became uncomfortable. ‘Do you wish me to explain why I came?’ she said.

‘Get on with it then.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said.

‘I'm sure you know.' Miss. Darling said. ‘That children in the bottom class at school are not expected to be able to read or spell or juggle with numbers when they first arrive. Five-year-old cannot do that. But Martrace can do it all. And if I am to believe her.’

‘Teach her what?’ Mr. Dicksnoter said.

‘To read. To read books.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Perhaps you did teach her. She was lying. You have shelves full of books all over the house. I would not know.

Perhaps you are both great readers.’

‘I wouldn't.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. She was still ratty at losing the sound on the MOVIE.

‘Was she lying? Then?’ Miss. Darling said. ‘When she told me that nobody taught her to multiply or to read? Did either of you teach her?’

‘Of course, we read.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘Don't be so daft. I read the motoring- new and steam power and the Motor from cover to cover every week.’

‘This child has already read a surprising number of books.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I was simply trying to find out if she came from a family that loved good literature.’

‘We don't hold with book-reading.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘You can't make a living from sitting on your fanny and reading storybooks. We don't keep them in the house.’

‘I see.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Well. All I came to tell you was that Martrace has a brilliant mind. But I expect you knew that already.’

‘Of course, I knew she could read.’ the mother said. ‘She spends her life up in her room buried in some silly book.’

‘But does it not intrigue you.' Miss. Darling said. ‘That a little five-year-old child is reading long adult novels by Dickens and Hemingway? Doesn't that make you jump up and down with excitement?’

‘Not particularly.’ the mother said. ‘I'm not in favor of bluestocking girls. A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later. Looks are more important than books. Miss. Hunky.’

‘The name is Darling.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Now look at me.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ‘Then look at you. You choose books. I chose looks.’

Miss. Darling looked at the plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face who was sitting across the room.

‘What did you say?’ she asked.

‘I said you chose books, and I chose looks.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ‘And who's finished the better off? Me. of course. I'm sitting pretty in a nice house with a successful businessperson, and you're left slaving away teaching a lot of nasty little children the ABC.’

‘Quite right. sugar-plum.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. casting a look of such simpering sloppiness at his wife it would have made a cat sick.

Miss. Darling decided that if she was going to get anywhere with these people, she must not lose her temper. ‘I haven't told you all of it yet.’ she said. ‘Martrace. as far as I can gather at this

early stage. It is also a mathematical genius. She can multiply complicated figures in her head like lightning.'

'What's the point of that when you can buy a calculator?' Mr. Dicksnoter said.

'A girl doesn't get a man by being brainy.' Ms. Dicksnoter said.

'Look at that film-star for instance.' she added. pointing at the silent MOVIE screen where a bosomy female was being embraced by a craggy actor in the moonlight. 'You don't think she got him to do that by multiplying figures at him. do you? Not likely. And

now he is going to marry her. you see if he does not. and she's going to live in a mansion with a butler and lots of house cleaners.’

Miss. Darling could hardly believe what she was hearing. She had heard that parents like this existed all over the place and that their children turned out to be delinquents and dropouts. but it was still a shock to meet a pair of them in the flesh.

‘Martrace's trouble.' she said. trying once again. ‘Is that she is so far ahead of everyone else around her that it might be worth thinking about some extra kind of private tuition. I seriously believe

that she could be brought up to university standard in two or three years with the proper coaching.’

‘University?’ Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. bouncing up in his chair. ‘Who wants to go to university for heaven's sake! All they learn there are unhealthy habits!’

‘That is not true.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘If you had a heart attack this minute and had to call a doctor. that the doctor would be a university graduate. If you get sued for selling someone a rotten second-hand car. You would have to get a lawyer and he would be a university graduate. too. Do not despise clever

people. Mr. Dicksnoter. But I can see we are not going to agree. I'm sorry I burst in on you like this.’ Miss. Darling rose from her chair and walked out of the room.

Mr. Dicksnoter followed her to the front door and spoke.

‘Good of you to come. Miss. Hawkes. or is it Miss. Harris?’

‘It's neither.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But let it go.’ And away she went.

17

Throwing the Hammer

‘Have you met the Mcfarts yet?’ Hortensia asked.

‘We've seen her at prayers.’ Dasey said. ‘But we haven't met her.’

‘You've got a treat coming to you.’ Hortensia said. ‘She hates exceedingly small children. She, therefore, loathes the bottom class and everyone in it. She thinks five-year-old are grubs that haven't yet hatched out.’

In went another fistful of crisps and when she spoke again. out sprayed the crumbs. ‘If you survive your first year you may just manage to live through the rest of your time here. But many do not survive. They get carried out on stretchers screaming. I've seen it often.’ Hortensia paused to observe the effect

these remarks were having on the two twitchy ones. Not very much. They seemed cool. So, the large one decided to regale them with further information.

‘I suppose you know the Mcfarts has a lockup cupboard in her private quarters called The Closet? Have you heard about the closet?’

Martrace and Dasey shook their heads and continued to gaze up at the giant. Being exceedingly small. they have inclined to mistrust any creature that was larger than they were. especially senior girls.

‘The Closet.' Hortensia went on. ‘Is a very tall but very narrow cupboard. The floor is only ten inches square so you cannot sit down or squat in it.

You must stand naked.

And three of the walls are made of cement with bits of broken glass sticking out all over. so, you cannot lean against them.

You must stand at attention all the time when you get locked up in there. It's terrible.’

‘Can't you lean against the door?’ Martrace asked.

‘Don't be daft.’ Hortensia said. ‘The door's got thousands of sharp spikey nails sticking out of it. They have been hammered through from the outside. by the Mcfarts herself.’

‘Have you ever been in there?’ Dasey asked.

‘The first term I was in there six times.’ Hortensia said.

‘Twice for an entire day and the other times for two hours each. But two hours is quite bad enough. It is pitch-dark and you must stand up dead straight and if you wobble at all you get spiked

either by the glass on the walls or the nails on the door.

‘Why were you put in?’ Martrace asked. ‘What had you done?’

‘The first time.' Hortensia said. ‘I poured half a tin of Golden Syrup onto the seat of the chair the Mcfarts was going to sit on at prayers. It was wonderful. When has done she lowered herself into the chair? There was a loud squelching noise like that made by a hippopotamus when lowering its foot into the mud on the banks of the Pompeii River. But you are too small and stupid to have read the Just So Stories. aren't you?’

‘I've read them.’ Martrace said.

‘You're a liar.’ Hortensia said amiably. ‘You can't even read yet. But no matter. So, when the Mcfarts sat down on the Golden Syrup. The squelch was beautiful. And when she jumped up again. The chair stuck to the seat of those awful green breeches she wears and produced her for a few seconds until the thick syrup slowly came unstuck. Then she clasped her hands to the seat of her breeches and both hands got covered in the muck. You should have heard her bellow.’

‘But how did she know it was you?’ Dasey asked.

‘A little squirt called Ollie Bog-whistle sneaked on me.’

Hortensia said. ‘I knocked his front teeth out.’

‘And the Mcfarts put you in The Closet for a complete day?’ Martrace asked. gulping.

‘All day long.’ Hortensia said. ‘I was off my rocker when she let me out. I was babbling like an idiot.’

‘What were the other things you did to get put in The Closet?’ Dasey asked.

‘Oh, I can't remember them all now.’ Hortensia said. She spoke with the

air of an old warrior who had been in so many battles that bravery had become commonplace. ‘It's all so long ago.’ she added. stuffing more crisps into her mouth. ‘Ah yes. I can remember one. Here is what happened. I chose a time when I knew the Mcfarts was out of the way of teaching the sixth former. and I put up my hand and asked to go to the bogs. But instead of going there. I sneaked into the Mcfarts's room. And after a speedy search, I found the drawer where she kept all her gym knickers.'

‘Go on.’ Martrace said. spellbound. ‘What happened next?’

‘I had sent away by post. you see. for this enormously powerful itching powder.’ Hortensia said. ‘It cost 50p for a packet and was called The Skin-Scorcher. The label said it was made from the powdered teeth of deadly snakes. and it was guaranteed to raise welts the size of walnuts on your skin. So, I sprinkled this stuff inside every pair of knickers in the drawer and then folded them all up again carefully.’ Hortensia paused to cram more crisps into her mouth.

‘Did it work?’ Dasey asked. The pleasant thing about Martrace was that if you had met her casually and talked to her you would have thought she was a

perfectly normal five-and-a-half-year-old child. She displayed almost no outward signs of her brilliance and she never showed off. ‘This is a very sensible and quiet little girl.’ you would have said to yourself. And unless for some reason you had started a discussion with her about literature or mathematics. you would never have known the extent of her brainpower.

It was therefore easy for Martrace to make friends with other children. All those in her class liked her.

They knew of course that she was ‘clever,’ because they had heard her

being questioned by Miss. Darling on the first day of term.

And they knew also that she was allowed to sit quietly with a book during lessons and not pay attention to the teacher.

But children of their age do not search deeply for reasons. They are far too wrapped up in their small struggles to worry overmuch about what others are doing and why.

18

Before the first week of term was up. awesome tales about the Headmistress. Miss. Mcfarts. began to

filter through to the newcomers. Martrace and Dasey. standing in a corner of the playground during morning-break on the third day. were approached by a rugged ten-year-old with a boil on her nose… called Hortensia.

‘New scum. I suppose.’ Hortensia said to them. looking down from her great height. She was eating from an extra-large bag of potato crisps and digging the stuff out in handfuls. ‘Welcome to bursal.’ she added. spraying bits of crisp out of her mouth like snowflakes.

The two tiny ones. confronted by this giant. kept a watchful silence.

‘Well.’ Hortensia said. ‘A few days later. during prayers. the Mcfarts suddenly started scratching herself like mad down below. Aha. I said to myself. Here we go. She has changed to a gym already. It was wonderful to be sitting there watching it all and knowing that I was the only person in the whole school who realized exactly what was going on inside the Mcfarts's pants. And I felt safe. too. I knew I could not be caught. Then the scratching got worse.

She could not stop. She must have thought she had a wasp's nest down there. And then. right in the middle of the Lord's Prayer. she leaped up and grabbed

her bottom and rushed out of the room.’ Among Martrace's new-found friends was the girl called Dasey. Right from the first day of term the two of them started wandering around together during the morning break and in the lunch hour. Dasey was exceptionally small for her age. a skinny little nymph with deep-brown eyes and with dark hair that was cut in a fringe across her forehead. Martrace liked her because she was gutsy and adventurous.

She liked Martrace for the same reasons. Both Martrace and Dasey were enthralled. It was quite clear to them that they were at this moment standing in the

presence of a master. Here was somebody who had brought the art of skullduggery to the highest point of perfection. somebody. moreover. Who was willing to risk life and limb in pursuit of her calling? They gazed in wonder at this goddess. and suddenly even the boil on her nose was no longer a blemish but a badge of courage.

‘But how did she catch you at that time?’ Dasey asked. breathless with wonder.

‘She didn't.’ Hortensia said. ‘But I got a day in The Closet just the same.’

‘Why?’ They both asked.

‘The Mcfarts.' Hortensia said. ‘Has a nasty habit of guessing. When she does not know who the culprit is. she guesses it. and the trouble is she is often right. I was the prime suspect this time because of the Golden Syrup job. and although I knew she did not have any proof. nothing I said made any difference. I kept shouting. 'How could I have done it? Miss. Mcfarts? I did not even know you kept any spare knickers at school! I do not even know what itching powder is! I've never heard of it!' But the lying did not help me despite the exceptional performance I put on. The Mcfarts simply grabbed me by one ear and rushed me to

The Closet at the double and threw me inside and locked the door. That was my second all-day stretch. It was absolute torture. I was spiked and cut all over when I came out.’

‘It's like a war.’ Martrace said. overawed.

‘You're darn right it's like a war.’ Hortensia cried. ‘And the casualties are terrific. We are the crusaders. the gallant army fighting for our lives with hardly any weapons at all and the

Mcfarts is the Prince of Darkness. The Foul Serpent. the Fiery Dragon with all the weapons at her command. It is a

tough life. We all try to support each other.’

‘You can rely on us.’ Dasey said. making her height of three feet two inches stretch as tall as possible.

‘No. I can't.’ Hortensia said. ‘You're only shrimps. But you never know. We may find a use for you one day in some undercover job.’

‘Tell us just a little bit more about what she does.’ Martrace said. ‘Please do.’

‘I mustn't frighten you before you've been here a week.’ Hortensia said.

‘You won't.’ Dasey said. ‘We may be small but we're quite tough.’

‘Listen to this then.’ Hortensia said. ‘Only yesterday the Mcfarts caught a boy called Julius Rottwinkle eating Liquorice Allsorts during the scripture lesson and she simply picked him up by one arm and flung him clear out of the open classroom window. Our classroom is one floor up and we saw Julius Rottwinkle go sailing out over the garden like a Frisbee and landing with a thump in the middle of the lettuce. Then the Mcfarts turned to us and spoke. ‘From now on. anybody caught eating in class goes straight out the window.’

‘Did this Julius Rottwinkle break any bones?’ Dasey asked.

‘Only a few.’ Hortensia said. ‘You've got to remember that the Mcfarts once threw the hammer for Britain in the Olympics so she's immensely proud of her right arm.’

‘What's throwing the hammer?’ Dasey asked.

‘The hammer…’

Hortensia said. ‘Is a ruddy great cannon-ball on the end of a long bit of wire. and the thrower whisks it round and round his or her head faster and faster

and then lets it go. You must be terrifically strong.

The Mcfarts will throw anything around just to keep her arm in. especially children.’

‘Good heavens.’ Dasey said.

‘I once heard her say.' Hortensia went on. ‘That a large boy is about the same weight as an Olympic hammer and therefore he's especially useful for practicing with.’

At that point, something strange happened. The playground. which up to then had been filled with shrieks and the

shouting of children at play. all at once became silent as the grave. ‘Watch out.’

Hortensia whispered. Martrace and Dasey glanced around and saw the gigantic figure of Miss. Mcfarts advancing through the crowd of children with menacing strides.

The children drew back hastily to let her through and her progress across the asphalt was like that of Moses going through the Red Sea when the waters parted.

A formidable figure she was too. in her belted smock and green breeches. Below the knees, her calf muscles stood

out like grapefruits inside her stockings. ‘Amanda Lynn Kayly!’ she was shouting. ‘You. Amanda Lynn come here!’

‘Hold your hats.’ Hortensia whispered.

‘What's going to happen?’ Dasey whispered back.

‘That idiot Amanda.' Hortensia said. ‘Has let her long hair grow even longer during the weeks and her mother has plaited it into pigtails. Silly thing to do.’

‘Why silly?’ Martrace asked.

‘If there's one thing the Mcfarts can't stand its pigtails.’ Hortensia said.

Martrace and Dasey saw the giant in green breeches advancing upon a girl of about ten who had a pair of plaited golden pigtails hanging over her shoulders. Each pigtail had a blue satin bow at the end of it and it all looked very pretty. The girl was wearing pigtails. Amanda Lynn. stood quite still. watching the advancing giant. and the expression on her face was one that you might find on the face of a person who is trapped in a small field with an enraged bull that is charging flat-out towards her.

The girl was glued to the spot. terror-struck. pop eyed. quivering.

knowing for certain that the Day of Judgment had come for her at last.

Miss. Mcfarts had now reached the victim and stood towering over her. ‘I want those filthy pigtails off before you come back to school tomorrow!’ she barked. ‘Chop 'em off and throw 'em in the dustbin. you understand?’

Amanda. paralyzed with fright. managed to stutter. ‘My mummy likes them. She p-p-plaits them for me every morning.’

‘Your mummy's a twit!’ the Mcfarts bellowed. She pointed a finger the size of salami at the child's head and

shouted. ‘You look like a rat with a tail coming out of its head!’

‘My m-m-mummy thinks I look lovely. Miss. T-T-Mcfarts.’ Amanda stuttered. shaking like a blancmange.

‘I don't give a tinker's toot what your mummy thinks!’ the Mcfarts yelled. and with that, she lunged forward and grabbed hold of Amanda's pigtails in her right fist, and lifted the girl clear off the ground. Then she started swinging her round and round her head. faster and faster and Amanda was screaming blue murder and the

Mcfarts was yelling. ‘I'll… give you pigtails. You little rat!’

‘Shades of the Olympics.’ Hortensia murmured. ‘She's getting up speed now just like she does with the hammer. Ten to one she's going to throw her.’

And now the Mcfarts was leaning back against the weight of the whirling girl and pivoting expertly on her toes.

spinning round and round. and soon Amanda Lynn was travelling so fast she became a blur. and suddenly. with a mighty grunt. The Mcfarts let go of the pigtails and Amanda went sailing like a

rocket right over the wire fence of the playground and high up into the sky.

‘Well thrown. sir!’ someone shouted from across the playground. … And Martrace.

-And-

Who was mesmerized by the whole foolish affair? saw Amanda Lynn descending in a long, graceful parabola onto the playing field beyond. She landed on the grass and bounced three times and finally came to rest. Then. amazingly. she sat up. She looked a trifle dazed and who could blame her. but after a minute or so

she was on her feet again and tottering back towards the playground.

The Mcfarts stood in the playground dusting off her hands. ‘Not bad.’ she said. ‘Considering I'm not in strict training. Not bad at all.’ Then she strode away.

‘She's mad.’ Hortensia said.

‘But don't the parents complain?’ Martrace asked.

‘Would yours?’ Hortensia asked. ‘I know mine wouldn't. She treats the mothers and fathers just the same as the children and they are all scared of her. I

will be seeing you sometime. you two.’ And with that, she sauntered away.

Dick Longcock and eating out the Cherry pie... ‘How can she get away with it?’ Dasey said to Martrace. ‘Surely the children go home and tell their mothers and fathers. I know my father would raise a terrific stink if I told him the Headmistress had grabbed me by the hair and slung me over the playground fence.’

‘No. he wouldn't.’ Martrace said. ‘And I'll tell you why. He simply wouldn't believe you.’

‘Of course, he would.’

‘He wouldn't.’ Martrace said. ‘And the reason is obvious. Your story would sound too ridiculous to be believed. And that is the Mcfarts's great secret.’

‘What is?’ Dasey asked.

Martrace said. ‘Never do anything by halves if you want to get away with it. Be outrageous. Go the whole hog. Make sure everything you do is so completely crazy it is unbelievable. No parent is going to believe this pigtail story. not in a million years. Mine would not. They'd call me a liar.’

‘In that case.' Dasey said. ‘Amanda's mother isn't going to cut her pigtails off.’

‘No. she isn't.’ Martrace said. ‘Amanda will do it herself.

You see if she doesn't.’

‘Do you think she's mad?’ Dasey asked.

‘Whom?’

‘The Mcfarts.’

‘No. I don't think she's mad.’ Martrace said. ‘But she's extremely dangerous. Being in this school is like being in a cage with a cobra.

You have to be amazingly fast on your feet.’

They got another example of how dangerous the Headmistress could be on the very next day. During lunch, an announcement was made that the whole school should go into the Assembly Hall and be seated as soon as the meal was over.

When all the two hundred and fifty or so children were settled down in Assembly. the Mcfarts marched onto the platform. None of the other teachers came in with her. She was carrying a riding-crop in her right hand.

She stood up there on center stage in her lime breeches with legs apart and riding-crop in hand. glaring at the sea of upturned faces before her.

‘What's going to happen?’ Dasey whispered.

‘I don't know.’ Martrace whispered back.

The whole school waited for what was coming next.

‘Dick Longcock!’ the Mcfarts barked suddenly.

‘Where is Dick Longcock?’

A hand shot up among the seated children.

‘Come up here!’ the Mcfarts shouted. ‘And look smart about it!’

‘Stand over there!’ the Mcfarts ordered. pointing. The boy stood to one side. He looked anxious. He knew very well he was not up there to be presented with a prize. He was watching the Headmistress with an exceedingly wary eye, and he kept edging farther and farther away from her with little shuffles of his feet. as a rat might edge away from a terrier that is watching it from across the room. His plump flabby face had

turned grey with fearful apprehension. His stockings hung about his ankles.

‘This clot.’ boomed the Headmistress. pointing the riding crop at him like a rapier. ‘This blackhead. this foul carbuncle. this poisonous pustule that you see before you are none other than a disgusting criminal. a denizen of the underworld. a member of the Mafia!’

‘Who. me?’ Dick Longcock said. looking genuinely puzzled.

‘A thief!’ the Mcfarts screamed. ‘A crook! A pirate! A brigand! A rustler!’

‘Steady on.’ the boy said. ‘I mean. dash it all. Principal.’

‘Do you deny it? Your miserable little gumboil? Do you plead not guilty?’

‘I don't know what you're talking about.’ the boy said. more puzzled than ever.

An eleven-year-old boy who was decidedly large and round stood up and waddled briskly forward. He climbed up onto the platform. ‘I'll tell you what I'm talking about. you are suppurating little blister!’ The Mcfarts shouted. ‘Yesterday morning. during break. you sneaked like a serpent into the kitchen and stole a slice of my private chocolate Cherry pie from my tea-tray! That tray had just been

prepared for me by the cook! It was my morning snack! And as for the Cherry pie.

It was my private stock! That was not a boy's Cherry pie! Don't you think for one minute I am going to eat the filth I gave to you? That Cherry pie was made from real butter and real cream! And he. that robber-bandit. that safe cracker. that highwayman standing over there with his socks around his ankles stole it and ate it!'

19

'I never did.' the boy exclaimed. turning from grey to white. 'Don't lie to me. Long cock!' barked the Mcfarts. 'The

cook saw you! What is more. she saw you eating it!’

The Mcfarts paused to wipe a fleck of froth from her lips.

When she spoke again her voice was suddenly softer. quieter.

More friendly. and she leaned towards the boy. smiling. ‘You like my special chocolate Cherry pie. don't you?

Long cock? It is rich and delicious. isn't it? Long cock?’

‘Very good.’ the boy mumbled. The words were out before he could stop himself.

‘You're right.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘It is particularly good. Therefore, I think you should congratulate the cook. When a gentleman has had a particularly delicious meal. Longcock. Always sends his compliments to the chef. You did not know that. did you. Long cock? But those who inhabit the criminal underworld are not noted for their good manners.’

The boy remained silent.

‘Cook!’ the Mcfarts shouted. turning her head towards the door. ‘Come here. cook! Long cock wishes to tell you how good your chocolate Cherry pie is!’

The cook. a tall, shriveled female who looked as though all her body-juices had been dried out of her long ago in a hot oven. walked on to the platform wearing a dirty white apron.

Her entrance had been arranged beforehand by the Headmistress.

‘Now then. Longcock.’ the Mcfarts boomed. ‘Tell cook what you think of her chocolate Cherry pie.’

‘Very good.’ the boy mumbled. You could see he was now beginning to wonder what all this was leading up to. The only thing he knew for certain was that the law forbade the Mcfarts to hit

him with the riding-crop that she kept smacking against her thigh. That was some comfort. but not much because the Mcfarts were unpredictable. One never knew what she was going to do next.

‘Then get it. And bring a knife to cut it with.’

The cook disappeared. At once, she was back again staggering under the weight of an enormous round chocolate Cherry pie on a China platter. The Cherry pie was fully eighteen inches in diameter, and it was covered with dark-brown chocolate icing.

‘Put it on the table.’ the Mcfarts said.

There was a small table center stage with a chair behind it.

The cook placed the Cherry pie carefully on the table. ‘Sit down.

Longcock.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘Sit there.’

The boy moved cautiously to the table and sat down. He stared at the gigantic Cherry pie.

‘There you are. Longcock.’ the Mcfarts said. and once again her voice became soft. persuasive. even gentle. ‘It's all for you. every bit of it. As you enjoyed

that slice you had yesterday so very much. I ordered a cook to bake you an extra-large one all for yourself.'

'Well. thank you.' the boy said. Bemused. 'Thank you. cook.' the boy said shy- and fat-faced.

'Thank cook. not me.' the Mcfarts said.

The cook stood there like a shriveled bootlace. tight-lipped.

Implacable. disapproving. She looked as though her mouth was full of lemon juice.

‘Come on then.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘Why don't you cut yourself a nice thick slice and try it?’

‘What? Now?’ The boy said. cautious. He knew there was a catch in this somewhere. but he was not sure where. ‘Can't I take it home instead?’ he asked. ‘There you are. cook.’ the Mcfarts cried. ‘Longcock likes your Cherry pie. He adores your Cherry pie. Do you have any more of your Cherry pie you could give him?’

‘I do indeed.’ the cook said. She seemed to have learned her lines by heart.

‘That would be impolite.’ the Mcfarts said. with a crafty grin. ‘You must show cookie here how grateful you are for all the trouble she's taken.’

The boy did not move.

‘Go on. get on with it.’ The Mcfarts said. ‘Cut a slice and taste it.

We haven't got all day.’

The boy picked up the knife and was about to cut into the Cherry pie when he stopped. He stared at the Cherry pie. Then he looked up at the Mcfarts. then at the tall stringy cook with her lemon-juice mouth.

All the children in the hall were watching tensely. waiting for something to happen. They felt certain it must. The Mcfarts was not a person who would give someone a whole chocolate Cherry pie to eat just out of kindness. Many were guessing that it had been filled with pepper or castor-oil or some other foul-tasting substance that would make the boy violently sick.

It might even be arsenic, and he would be dead in ten seconds flat. Or it was a boobytrapped Cherry pie and the whole thing would blow up the moment it was cut. taking Dick Longcock with it. No

one in the school put it past the Mcfarts to do any of these things.

‘I don't want to eat it.’ the boy said.

'Taste it. you little brat.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘You're insulting the cook.’

Very gingerly the boy began to cut a thin slice of the vast Cherry pie. Then he levered the slice out. Then he put down the knife and took the sticky thing in his fingers and started very slowly to eat it.

‘It's good. isn't it?’ the Mcfarts asked.

‘Very good.’ the boy said. chewing and swallowing. He finished the slice.

‘Have another.’ the Mcfarts said.

‘That's enough. thank you.’ the boy murmured.

‘I said to have another.’ the Mcfarts said. and now there was an altogether sharper edge to her voice. ‘Eat another slice! Do as you are told!’

‘I don't want another slice.’ the boy said.

Suddenly the Mcfarts exploded. ‘Eat!’ she shouted. banging her thigh with

the riding-crop. ‘If I tell you to eat. you will eat! You wanted Cherry pie!

You stole Cherry pie! And now you have Cherry pie! What is more. you are going to eat it! You do not leave this platform, and nobody leaves this hall until you have eaten the entire Cherry pie that is sitting there in front of you!

Do I make myself clear? Long cock? Do you get my meaning?’

The boy looked at the Mcfarts. Then he looked down at the enormous Cherry pie.

‘Eat! Eat! Eat -eat it all out!’ the Mcfarts was yelling. Very slowly the boy

cut himself another slice and began to eat it.

Martrace was fascinated. ‘Do you think he can do it?’ she whispered to Dasey.

‘No.’ Dasey whispered back. ‘It's impossible. He'd be sick before he was halfway through.’

The boy kept going. When he had finished the second slice. He looked at the Mcfarts. hesitating.

‘Eat this bitch out!’ she shouted. ‘Greedy little thieves who like to eat Cherry pie must have Cherry pie! Eat faster boy! Eat faster! We do not want to

be here all day! And do not stop like you are doing now! Next time you stop before it's all finished, you'll go straight to The Closet, and I intend to lock the door and throw the key down the well!’

The boy cut the third slice and started to eat it. He finished this one quicker than the other two and when that was done, he immediately picked up the knife and cut the next slice. In some peculiar way, he seemed to be getting into his stride.

Martrace- watching closely. saw no signs of distress in the boy yet.

If anything. he seemed to be gathering confidence as he went along. ‘He's doing well.’ she whispered to Dasey.

‘He'll be sick soon.’ Dasey whispered back. ‘It's going to be horrid.’

When Dick Longcock had eaten his way through half of the entire enormous Cherry pie. he paused for just a couple of seconds and took several deep breaths.

The Mcfarts stood hands-on-hips. glaring at him. ‘Silence!’ shouted the Mcfarts.

The boy cuts himself another thick slice and starts eating it fast. There

were still no signs of flagging or giving up. He certainly did not look as though he was about to stop and cry out. ‘I can't. I cannot eat anymore! I'm going to be sick!’ He was still running.

‘Get on with it!’ she shouted. ‘Eat it up!’

Suddenly the boy let out a gigantic belch that rolled around the Assembly Hall like thunder. Many of the audience began to giggle.

And now a subtle change was coming over the two hundred and fifty watching children in the audience. Earlier on. they had sensed impending disaster.

They had prepared themselves for an unpleasant scene in which the wretched boy. stuffed to the gills with cherry pie. would have to surrender and beg for mercy and then they would have watched the triumphant Mcfarts forcing increased Cherry pie into the mouth of the breathless boy. Unexpectedly someone shouted.

‘Come on Brucie! You can make it! ’Not a bit of it. Dick Longcock was three-quarters of the way through and still going strong. One sensed that he was almost beginning to enjoy himself. He had a mountain to climb, and he was jolly well going to reach the top or die in the

attempt. What is more? He had now become very conscious of his audience and of how they were all silently rooting for him. This was nothing less than a battle between him and the mighty Mcfarts.

The Mcfarts wheeled around and yelled. ‘Silence!’ The audience watched intently. They were thoroughly caught up in the contest. They were longing to start cheering but they did not dare.

‘I think he's going to make it.’ Martrace whispered.

‘I think so too.’ Dasey whispered back. ‘I wouldn't have believed anyone in

the world could eat the whole of a Cherry pie that size.'

'The Mcfarts doesn't believe it either.' Martrace whispered. 'Look at her. She is turning redder and redder. She's going to kill him if he wins.'

The boy is slowing down now. There was no doubt about that. But he kept pushing the stuff into his mouth with the dogged perseverance of a long-distance runner who has sighted the finishing-line and knows he must keep going. As the very last mouthful disappeared. A tremendous cheer arose from the audience and children were

leaping onto their chairs, yelling, clapping, and shouting. ‘Well done

Brucie! Good for you. Brucie! You have won a gold medal.

Brucie!’

The Mcfarts stood motionless on the platform. Her great horsy face had turned the color of molten lava and her eyes were glittering with fury. She glared at Dick Longcock who was sitting on his chair like some huge, overstuffed grub. replete. comatose. unable to move or to speak. A fine sweat was beading his forehead but there was a grin of triumph on his face.

Suddenly the Mcfarts lunged forward and grabbed the large empty China platter on which the Cherry pie had rested. She raised it high in the air and brought it down with a crash right on the top of the wretched Dick Longcock's head and pieces flew all over the platform.

The boy was by now so full of Cherry pie he was like a sackful of wet cement, and you could not have hurt him with a sledgehammer. He simply shook his head a few times and went on grinning. ‘Go to blazes!’ screamed the Mcfarts and she marched off the platform followed closely by the cook.

Dasey,

‘What if the jug's not in the kitchen?’ Dasey asked.

‘There are a dozen Headmistress's jugs and glasses in the kitchen.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘They are used all over the school.’

‘I won't forget.’ Dasey said. ‘I promise I won't.’

Already Dasey's scheming mind was going over the possibilities that this water-jug job had opened for her. She longed to do something truly heroic. She admired the older girl Hortensia to distraction for the daring deeds she had performed in the school. She also admired

Martrace who had sworn at her secrecy about the parrot job she had brought off at home. and the great hair-oil switch which had bleached her father's hair. It was her turn now to become a hero if only she could produce a brilliant plot.

On the way home from school that afternoon she began to mull over the various possibilities. and when at last the germ of a brilliant idea hit her. She began to expand on it and laid her plans with the same care the Duke of Wellington had done before the Battle of Waterloo. Admittedly the enemy on this occasion was not Jace.

But you would never have anyone at Crunchem Hall to admit that the Headmistress was a less formidable foe than the famous

Frenchman. Great skill would have to be exercised. Dasey told herself. and great secrecy observed if she were to come out of this exploit alive.

There was a muddy pond at the bottom of Dasey's garden and this was the home of a colony of newts. The newt. although common in English pounds. is not often seen by ordinary people because it is a shy and murky creature. It is an incredibly ugly gruesome-looking animal. like a baby crocodile but with a shorter

head. It is quite harmless but does not look like it. It is about six inches long and very slim. with greenish-grey skin on top and an orange-colored belly underneath. It is. in fact. an amphibian. which can live in or out of the water.

That evening Dasey went to the bottom of the garden determined to catch a newt. They are swiftly moving animals and not easy to get hold of. She lay on the bank for a long time waiting patiently until she spotted a whopper. Then. using her school hat as a net. she swooped and caught it. She had lined her pencil-box with pond-weed ready to receive the creature. but she discovered that it was

not easy to get the newt out of the hat and into the pencil-box. It wriggled and squirmed like quicksilver and. apart from that. the box was only just long enough to take it. When she did get it in at last. She had to be careful not to trap its tail in the lid when she slid it closed. A boy next door called Graceie Entwistle had told her that if you chopped off a newt's tail. The tail stayed alive and grew into another newt ten times bigger than the first one. It could be the size of an alligator. Dasey did not believe that. but she was not prepared to risk it happening.

Eventually, she managed to slide the lid of the pencil-box right home and

the new washers. Then, on second thoughts. She opened the lid just the tiniest fraction so that the creature could breathe.

The next day she carried her secret weapon to school in her satchel. She was tingling with excitement. She was longing to tell Martrace about her plan of battle. In fact. She wanted to tell the whole class. But she finally decided to tell nobody. It was better that way because then no one. even when put under the most severe torture. would be able to name her as the culprit.

Lunchtime came. Today it was sausages and baked beans. Dasey's favorite. but she could not eat it.

‘Are you feeling all right? Dasey?’ Miss. Darling asked from the head of the table.

‘I had such a huge breakfast.' Dasey said. ‘I really couldn't eat a thing.’

(The Weekly Test)

At two o'clock sharp the class assembled. including Miss. Darling noted that the jug of water and the glass were in the proper place. Then she took up a position standing right at the back. Everyone waited. Suddenly in marched

the gigantic figure of the Headmistress in her belted smock and green breeches.

‘Good afternoon. children.’ she barked.

‘Good afternoon. Miss. Mcfarts.’ they chirruped.

The Headmistress stood before the class. legs apart; hands-on-hips. glaring at the small boys and girls who sat nervously at their desks in front of her.

‘Not a very pretty sight.’ she said. Her expression was one of utter distaste. as though she were looking at something a dog had done in the middle of the floor.

‘What a bunch of nauseating little warts you are.’

Everyone had the sense to stay silent.

‘It makes me vomit.' she went on. ‘To think that I am going to have to put up with a load of garbage like you in my school for the next six years. I can see that I'm going to have to expel as many of you as possible as soon as possible to save myself from going around the bend.’ She paused and snorted several times. It was a curious noise. You can hear the same sort of thing if you walk through a riding-stable when the horses are being fed. ‘I suppose.' she went on. ‘Your mothers and

fathers tell you-you're wonderful. Well. I am here to tell you the opposite. and you'd better believe me. Stand up, everybody!’

They all got quickly to their feet.

‘Now put your hands out in front of you. And as I walk past, I want you to turn them over so I can see if they are clean on both sides.’

The Mcfarts began a slow march along the rows of desks inspecting the hands. All went well until she came to a small boy in the second row. ‘What's your name?’ she barked.

‘Tom.’ the boy said.

‘Tom what?’

‘Tom Hicks.’ the boy said.

‘Tom Hicks what?’ the Mcfarts bellowed. She bellowed so loud she nearly blew the little chap out of the window.

‘That's it.’ Tom said. ‘Unless you want my middle names as well.’ He was a brave little fellow and one could see that he was trying not to be scared by the Gorgon who towered above him.

‘I do not want your middle names. you blister!’ the Gorgon bellowed. ‘What is my name?’

‘Miss. Mcfarts.’ Tom said.

‘Then use it when you address me! Now then. Let us try again. What is your name?’

‘Tom Hicks. Miss. Mcfarts.’ Tom said.

‘That's better.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘Your hands are filthy.

Tom! When did you last wash them?’

‘Well. let me think.’ Tom said. ‘That's rather difficult to remember exactly. It could have been yesterday, or it could have been the day before.’

The Mcfarts's whole body and face seemed to swell up as though she were being inflated by a bicycle pump.

‘I knew it!’ she bellowed. ‘I knew as soon as I saw you that you were nothing but a piece of filth! What is your father's job? a sewage-worker?’

‘He's a doctor.’ Tom said. ‘And a jolly good one. He says we're all so covered with bugs anyway that a bit of extra dirt never hurts anyone.’

‘I'm glad he's not my doctor.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘And why. might I ask. is there a baked bean on the front of your shirt?’

‘We had them for lunch. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘And do you usually put your lunch on the front of your shirt? Tom? Is that what this famous doctor father of yours has taught you to do?’

‘Baked beans are hard to eat. Miss. Mcfarts. They keep falling off my fork.’

‘You are disgusting!’ The Mcfarts bellowed. ‘You are a walking germ-factory! I do not wish to see any more of you today! Go and stand in the corner on one leg with your face to the wall!’

‘But Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘Don't argue with me. boy. or I will make you stand on your head! Now do as you're told!’

Tom went.

‘Now stay where you are. boy. while I test you on your spelling to see if you have learned anything at all this past week. And do not turn around when you talk to me. Keep your nasty little face to the wall. Now then. spell 'write.'’

‘Which one?’ Tom asked. ‘The thing you do with a pen or the one that means the opposite of wrong?’ He happened to be an unusually bright child

and his mother had worked hard with him at home on spelling and reading.

‘The one with the pen. you little fool.’

Tom spelled it correctly which surprised the Mcfarts. She thought she had given him a very tricky word. one that he would not have learned yet. and she was peeved that he had succeeded.

Then Tom said. still balancing on one leg and facing the wall. ‘Miss. Darling taught us how to spell a new exceptionally long word yesterday.’

‘And what word was that?’ the Mcfarts asked softly. The softer her voice

became. the greater the danger. but Tom was not to know this.

‘'Difficulty,'’ Tom said. ‘Everyone in the class can spell 'difficulty' now.’

‘What nonsense.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘You are not supposed to learn long words like that until you are at least eight or nine. And do not try to tell me everybody in the class can spell that word. You are lying to me. Tom.’

‘Test someone.’ Tom said. taking an awful chance. ‘Test anyone you like.’

The Mcfarts dangerous glittering eyes roved around the classroom. ‘You.’

she said. pointing at a tiny and daft little girl called Prudence. ‘Spell 'difficulty.'’

Amazingly. Prudence spelled it correctly and without a moment's hesitation.

The Mcfarts were properly taken aback. ‘Humph!’ she snorted. ‘And I suppose Miss. Darling wasted the whole of one lesson teaching you to spell that one single word?’

‘Oh no. she didn't.’ piped Tom. ‘Miss. Darling taught it to us in three minutes, so we'll never forget it. She teaches us lots of words in three minutes.’

‘And what exactly is this magic method. Miss. Darling?’ asked the Headmistress.

‘I'll show you.’ piped up the brave Tom again. coming to Miss.

Darling's rescue. ‘Can I put my other foot down and turn around; please. while I show you?’

‘You may do neither!’ snapped the Mcfarts. ‘Stay as you are and show me just the same!’

‘All right.’ said Tom. wobbling crazily on one leg. ‘Miss. Darling gives us a little song about each word, and we all sing it together and we learn to spell it in

no time. Would you like to hear the song about 'struggle'?’

‘I should be fascinated.’ the Mcfarts said in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

‘Here it is.’ Tom said.

‘Ms. D. Ms. I. Ms. FFI

Ms. C. Ms. U. Ms. LTY.

Or M- i- ss -i- ss- I- pp- I- we go that on the other day…

That spells struggle.’

‘How perfectly outlandish!’ snorted the Mcfarts. ‘Why are all these women married? And anyway, you are not

meant to teach poetry when you are teaching spelling. Cut it out in the future. Miss. Darling.'

'But it does teach them some of the harder words wonderfully well.' Miss. Darling murmured.

'Don't argue with me. Miss. Darling!' the Headmistress thundered. 'Just do as you're told! I intend to now test the class on the multiplication tables to see if Miss. Darling has taught you anything at all in that direction.' The Mcfarts had returned to her place in front of the class. and her diabolical gaze was moving slowly along the rows of tiny pupils. 'You!' she barked. pointing at a

small boy called Graceie in the front row. ‘What are the two sevens?’

‘Sixteen.’ Graceie answered with foolish abandon.

The Mcfarts started advancing slowly and soft-footed upon Graceie in the manner of a tigress stalking a small deer. Graceie suddenly became aware of the danger signals and quickly tried again. ‘It's eighteen!’ he cried. ‘Two sevens are eighteen. not sixteen!’

‘Your ignorant little slug!’ The Mcfarts bellowed. ‘You witless weed! You empty-headed hamster! You- a stupid glob of glue!’ She had now stationed herself

directly behind Graceie. and suddenly she extended a hand the size of a tennis racquet and grabbed all the hair on Graceie's head in her fist. Graceie had a lot of golden-colored hair. His mother thought it was beautiful to behold and took delight in allowing it to grow extra-long.

The Mcfarts had as great a dislike for long hair on boys as she had for plaits and pigtails on girls, and she was about to show it. She took a firm grip on Graceie's long golden tresses with her giant hand and then. by raising her muscular right arm. she lifted the helpless boy clean out of his chair and held him aloft.

Graceie yelled. He twisted and squirmed and kicked the air and went on yelling like a stuck pig. and Miss. Mcfarts bellowed. ‘Two sevens are fourteen! Two sevens are fourteen!

I am not letting you go till you say it!’

From the back of the class. Miss. Darling cried out. ‘Miss. Mcfarts! Please let him down! You are hurting him! All his hair might come out!’

‘And well it might if he doesn't stop wriggling!’ snorted the Mcfarts. ‘Keep still. you are squirming worm!’

It was a quite extraordinary sight to see this giant Headmistress dangling the small boy high in the air and the boy spinning and twisting like something on the end of a string and shrieking his head off.

‘Say it!’ bellowed the Mcfarts. ‘Say two sevens are fourteen!

Hurry up or I will start jerking you up and down and then your hair really will come out and we will have enough of it to stuff a sofa! Get on with it boy! Say two sevens are fourteen and I'll let you go!’

‘T-t-two s-sevens are f-f-fourteen.’ gasped Graceie. whereupon the Mcfarts. true to her word. opened her hand and quite literally let him go. He was a long way off the ground when she released him, and he plummeted to earth and hit the floor and bounced like a football.

‘I don't like small people.’ she was saying. ‘Small people should never be seen by anybody. They should be kept out of sight in boxes like hairpins and buttons. I cannot for the life of me see why children must take so long to grow up. I think they do it on purpose.’

Another extremely brave little boy in the front row spoke up and spoke.

‘But surely you were a small person once. Miss. Mcfarts. weren't you?’

‘Get up and stop whimpering.’ The Mcfarts barked.

Graceie got up and went back to his desk massaging his scalp with both hands. The Mcfarts returned to the front of the class. The children sat there hypnotized. None of them had seen anything quite like this before.

It was splendid entertainment. It was better than a pantomime. but with one significant difference. In this room, there was an enormous human bomb in front of them which was liable to explode

and blow someone to bits any moment. The children's eyes were riveted on the Headmistress.

‘I was never a small person.’ she snapped. ‘I have been large all my life and I don't see why others can't be the same way.’

‘But you must have started as a baby.’ the boy said.

‘Me! A baby!’ shouted the Mcfarts. ‘How dare you suggest such a thing! What cheek! What infernal insolence! What is your name?

boy? And stand up when you speak to me!’

The boy stood up. ‘My name is Jennie Ink. Miss. Mcfarts.’ He spoke.

‘Jennie what?’ The Mcfarts shouted.

‘Ink.’ the boy said.

‘Don't be an ass. boy! There's no such name!’

‘Look in the phone book.’ Jennie said. ‘You'll see my father there under Ink.’

‘Very well. then.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘You may be Ink. young man. but let me tell you something. You are not indelible. I will very soon rub you out if

you try getting clever with me. Spell what.’

‘I don't understand.’ Jennie said. ‘What do you want me to spell?’

‘Spell what. you idiot! Spell the word 'what'!’ ‘W. O. Tttta.’ Jennie said. answering too quickly.

There was a nasty silence.

‘I'll give you one more chance.’ The Mcfarts said. not moving.

‘Ah yes. I know.’ Jennie said. ‘It's got an H in it. W. H. O- 0. T. It's easy.’ That is when she throws her out the window… by her underwire… the class

stops as she makes her way back to class to do it all over…

In two large strides, the Mcfarts were behind Jennie's desk. and there she stood. a pillar of doom towering over the helpless boy. Jennie glanced fearfully back over his shoulder at the monster. ‘I was right. wasn't I?’ he murmured nervously. ‘You were wrong!’ the Mcfarts barked. ‘In fact, you strike me as the sort of poisonous little pockmark that will always be wrong! You sit wrong! You look wrong! You speak wrong! You are wrong all around! I will give you one more chance to be right! Spell 'what'!’

Jennie hesitated. Then he said very slowly. ‘It's not W. O. T. and it's not W. H. O. T. is there an E on the end, or no? Maybe…Ah. I know. It must be W. H. O. T. T.’

Standing behind Jennie. The Mcfarts reached out and took hold of the boy's two ears. one with each hand. pinching them between forefinger and thumb.

‘Ow!’ Jennie cried. ‘Ow! You're hurting me!’

‘I haven't started yet.’ the Mcfarts said energetically. As well as now. taking a firm grip on his two ears.

she lifted him bodily out of his seat and held him aloft.

Like Graceie before her. Jennie squealed the house down.

From the back of the classroom Miss. Darling cried out. ‘Miss.

Mcfarts! Do not! Please let him go! His ears might come off!’

‘They'll never come off.’ the Mcfarts shouted back. ‘I have discovered through extensive experience. Miss. Darling. that the ears of small boys are stuck very firmly to their heads.’ ‘Let her go. Miss. Mcfarts. please.’ begged Miss. Darling. ‘You could damage him. you

really could! You could wrench them right off!’

‘Ears never come off!’ the Mcfarts shouted. ‘They stretch most stunningly. like these are doing now. but I can assure you they never come off!’

Jennie was squealing louder than ever and pedaling the air with his legs.

Martrace had never seen a boy. or anyone else for that matter. held aloft by his ears alone. Like Miss. Darling, she felt sure both ears were going to come off at any moment with all the weight that was on them.

The Mcfarts were shouting. ‘The word 'what' is spelled W. H. A. T. Now spell it. you little dick-wart!’

Jennie did not hesitate. He had learned from watching Graceie a few minutes before that the quicker you answered the quicker you were released. ‘W. H. A. T.' he squealed.

‘Spells what!’

Still holding him by the ears. the Mcfarts lowered him back into his chair behind his desk. Then she marched back to the front of the class. dusting off her hands one against the other like someone who has been handling something grimy.

There is nothing like a little meandering and fidgeting to encourage them to remember things. It concentrates their minds delightfully.’ ‘That's the way to make them learn. Miss. Darling.’ she said. ‘You take it from me. It is no good just telling them. You must hammer it into them.

‘You could do them permanent damage. Miss. Mcfarts.’ Miss. Darling cried out.

‘Oh. I have. I'm quite sure I have.’ the Mcfarts answered.

Grinning. ‘Jennie's ears will have stretched quite considerably in the last

couple of minutes! They will be much longer now than they were before. There is nothing wrong with that. Miss. Darling. It'll give him an interesting pixie look for the rest of his life.’

‘But Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘Oh. do shut up. Miss. Darling! You are as wet as any of them. If you cannot cope here, then you can find a job in some cotton wool private school for rich brats. When you have been teaching for as long as I have, you will realize that it is no good at all being kind to children. Read Nicholas Nickleby. Miss. Darling. by Mr. Dickens.

Read about Mr. Wakeford Squeers; the admirable principal of Sotheby’s Hall. He knew how to handle the little brutes. did not he! He knew how to use birch. did not he! He kept their backsides so warm you could have fried eggs and bacon on them! A fine book. that. But I don't suppose this bunch of morons we've got here will ever read it because by the look of them they are never going to learn to read anything!’

‘I've read it.’ Martrace said quietly.

The Mcfarts flicked her head around and looked carefully at the small girl with dark hair and deep brown eyes

sitting in the second row. ‘What did you say?’ she asked sharply.

‘I said I've read it. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘Read what?’

‘Nicholas Nickleby. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘You are lying to me. madam!’ the Mcfarts shouted. glaring at Martrace. ‘I doubt there is a single child in the entire school who has read that book. And here you are. an unhatched shrimp sitting in the lowest form there is. trying to tell me about a whopping great lie like that! Why do you do it? You must take me for a fool! Do you take me for a fool? child?’

‘Well.’ Martrace said. Then she hesitated. She would like to have said. ‘Yes. I jolly well do.’ but that would have been suicide. ‘Well.’ she said again. still hesitating. still refusing to say ‘No.’

The Mcfarts sensed what the child was thinking, and she did not like it. ‘Stand up when you speak to me!’ she snapped.

‘What is your name?’

Martrace stood up and spoke. ‘My name is Martrace Dicksnoter. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘Dicksnoter. is it?’ the Mcfarts said. ‘In that case, you must be the

daughter of that man who owns Dicksnoter Motors?’

‘Yes. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘He's a crook!’ the Mcfarts shouted. ‘A week ago, he sold me a second-hand car that he said was almost new. I thought he was a splendid person then. But this morning. while I was driving that car through the village. The entire engine fell out onto the road! The whole thing was filled with sawdust! The man's a thief and a robber! I will have his skin for sausages. you see if I don't!’

‘He's clever at his business.’ Martrace said.

‘Clever my foot!’ the Mcfarts shouted. ‘Miss. Darling tells me that you are meant to be clever. too! Well, madam. I do not like clever people! They are all crooked! You are most certainly crooked! Before I fell out with your father. He told me some very nasty stories about the way you behaved at home! But you would better not try anything at this school. young lady. I intend to keep an incredibly careful eye on you from now on.

Sit down and keep quiet.’

The First Miracle Martrace sat down again at her desk. The Mcfarts seated herself behind the teacher's table- muting to herself yes make-fun of my

name. It was the first time she had sat down during the lesson.

Then she reached out a hand and took hold of her water-jug. Still holding the jug by the handle but not lifting it yet. she spoke. ‘I have never been able to understand why small children are so disgusting.

They are the bane of my life. They are like insects. They should be got rid of as early as possible. We get rid of flies with fly-spray and by hanging up flypaper. I have often thought of inventing a spray to get rid of small children. How splendid it would be to walk into this classroom with a gigantic spray-gun in my hands

and start pumping it. Or better still. some huge strips of sticky paper.

I would hang them all around the school and you would all get stuck to them and that would be the end of it. Wouldn't that be a clever idea?

Miss. Darling?’

‘If it's meant to be a joke. Principal. I don't think it's a very funny one.’ Miss. Darling said from the back of the class. ‘You wouldn't. would you. Miss. Darling.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘And it's not meant to be a joke. My idea of a perfect school. Miss. Darling. has no children in it at all. One of these days I intend to start

up a school like that. I think it will be phenomenally successful.’

The women mad. Miss. Darling was telling herself. She is round- the twist. She is the one who ought to be got rid of.

The Mcfarts now lifted the large blue porcelain water jug and poured some water into her glass. And suddenly. with water. out came the long slimy newt straight into the glass. plop!

The Mcfarts let out a yell and leaped off her chair as though a firecracker had gone off underneath her. And now the children also saw the long

thin slimy yellow-bellied lizard like a creature twisting and turning in the glass. and they squirmed and jumped about as well. shouting. ‘What is it?

Oh. It is disgusting! It is a snake! It is a baby crocodile! It's an alligator!’

‘Lookout. Miss. Mcfarts!’ cried Dasey. ‘I'll bet it bites!’

The Mcfarts. this female giant. stood there in her green breeches. quivering like a blancmange. She was especially furious that someone had succeeded in making her jump and yell like that because she prided herself on her toughness. She stared at the creature

twisting and wriggling in the glass. Curiously enough. She had never seen a newt before. Natural history was not her strong point. She had not the faintest idea what this thing was. It certainly looked extremely unpleasant. Slowly she sat down again in her chair.

She looked at this moment more terrifying than ever before. The fires of fury and hatred were smoldering in her small black eyes.

‘Martrace!’ she barked. ‘Stand up!’

‘Who. me?’ Martrace said. ‘What have I done?’

‘Stand up. you are disgusting little cockroach!’

‘I haven't done anything. Miss. Mcfarts. Honestly, I have not. I've never seen that slimy thing before!’

‘Stand up at once; you- filthy little maggot SHIT!’

Reluctantly. Martrace got to her feet. She was in the second row. Dasey was in the row behind her. feeling a bit guilty. She had not intended to get her friend into trouble. On the other hand. she was certainly not about to own up.

''You are vile. repulsive. repellent. malicious little brute!’ the Mcfarts was

shouting. ‘You are not fit to be in this school! You ought to be behind bars. That is where you ought to be! I intend to have you drummed out of this establishment in utter disgrace! I intend to have the prefects chase you down the corridor and out of the front door with hockey-sticks! I intend to have the staff escort you home under armed guard! And then I intend to make sure you are sent to a reformatory for delinquent girls for a minimum of forty years!’

The Mcfarts was in such a rage that her face had taken on a boiled color and little flecks of froth were gathering at the corners of her mouth. Nevertheless.

She was not the only one who was losing her cool. Martrace was also beginning to see red. She did not in the least mind being accused of having done something she had done. She could see the justice of that. It was. however. a new experience for her to be accused of a crime that she had not committed. She had had absolutely nothing to do with that beastly creature in the glass. By golly. she thought. that rotten Mcfarts is not going to pin this one on me!

‘I did not do it!’ she screamed.

‘Oh yes. you did!’ the Mcfarts roared back. ‘Nobody else could have thought up a trick like that! Your father

was right to warn me about you!' The woman had lost control of herself completely. She was ranting like a maniac. 'You are finished in this school. young lady!' she shouted. 'You are finished everywhere. I intend to personally see to it that you are put away in a place where not even the crows can land their droppings on you! You will probably never become exposed again!'

'I'm telling you I did not do it!' Martrace screamed. 'I've never even seen a creature like that in my life!'

'You have put a. a. a crocodile in my drinking water!' the Mcfarts yelled back. 'There is no worse crime in the

world against a Headmistress! Now sit down and do not say a word! Go on. sit down at once!’

‘But I'm telling you.’ Martrace shouted. refusing to sit down.

‘I am telling you to shut up!’ the Mcfarts roared. ‘If you do not shut up at once and sit down, I intend to remove my belt and let you have it with the end that has the buckle!’

Slowly Martrace sat down. Oh. the rottenness of it all! The unfairness! How dare they expel her for something she had not done!

Martrace felt herself getting angrier. and angrier. and angrier. so unbearably angry that something was bound to explode inside her very soon.

The newt was still squirming in the tall glass of water. It looked uncomfortable. The glass was not big enough for it. Martrace glared at the Mcfarts. How she hated her. She glared at the glass with the newt in it. She longed to march up and grab the glass and tip the contents. newt and all. over the Mcfarts's head. She trembled to think what the Mcfarts would do to her if she did that.

The Mcfarts were sitting behind the teacher's table starting with a mixture of horror and fascination at the newt wriggling in the glass. Martrace's eyes were also riveted on the glass. And now. quite slowly. there began to creep over Martrace a most extraordinary and peculiar feeling. The feeling was mostly in the eyes. A kind of electricity seemed to be gathering inside them. A sense of power was brewing in her eyes. a feeling of great strength was settling deep inside her eyes. But there was also another feeling which was something else altogether. and which she could not

understand. It was like flashes of lightning.

Little waves of lightning seemed to be flashing out of her eyes. Her eyeballs were beginning to get hot. as though vast energy was building up somewhere inside them. It was an amazing sensation. She kept her eyes steadily on the glass. and now the power was concentrating in one small part of each eye and growing stronger and stronger, and it felt as though millions of tiny little invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out of her eyes towards the glass she was staring at. ‘Tip it!’ Martrace whispered. ‘Tip it over!’

She saw the glass wobble. It tilted backward a fraction of an inch. then righted itself again. She kept pushing at it with all those millions of invisible little arms and hands that were reaching out from her eyes. feeling the power that was flashing straight from the two little black dots in the very centers of her eyeballs.

'Tip it!' she whispered again. 'Tip it over!'

Once more the glass wobbled. She pushed harder still. willing her eyes to shoot out more power. And then; very-very slowly. so slowly she could hardly see it happening. The glass began to lean backward. farther and farther and farther

back until it was balancing on just one edge of its base. And there it teetered for a few seconds before finally toppling over and falling with a sharp tinkle onto the desktop. The water in it and the squirming newt splashed out all over Miss. Mcfarts's enormous bosom. The principal let out a yell that must have rattled every windowpane in the building and for the second time in the last five minutes she shot out of her chair like a rocket.

The newt clutched desperately at the cotton smock where it covered the great chest and there it clung with its little claw-like feet. The Mcfarts looked

down and saw it and she bellowed even louder and with a swipe of her hand, she sent the creature flying across the classroom. It landed on the floor beside Dasey's desk and very quickly she ducked down and picked it up and put it into her pencil-box for another time. A newt. she decided. It was a useful thing to have around.

The Mcfarts. her face more like a boiled ham than ever. was standing before the class quivering with fury. Her massive bosom was heaving in and out and the splash of water down the front of it made a dark wet patch that had soaked right through to her skin.

‘Who did it?’ she roared. ‘Come on! Own up! Step forward! You will not escape this time! Who is responsible for this dirty job? Who pushed over this glass?’

Nobody answered. The whole room remained silent as a tomb.

‘Martrace!’ she roared. ‘It was you! I know it was you!’

Martrace. in the second row. sat very still and said nothing. A strange feeling of serenity and confidence was sweeping over her and suddenly, she found that she was frightened by nobody in the world. With the power of her eyes

alone she had compelled a glass of water to tip and spill its contents over the horrible Headmistress. and anybody who could do that could do anything.

‘Speak up. you clotted carbuncle!’ roared the Mcfarts.

‘Admit that you did it!’

Martrace looked right back into the flashing eyes of this infuriated female giant and said with total calmness. ‘I have not moved away from my desk. Miss. Mcfarts. since the lesson began. I can say no more.’

Suddenly the entire class seemed to rise against the Headmistress. ‘She

didn't move!’ they cried out. ‘Martrace didn't move! Nobody moved! You must have knocked it over yourself!’

‘I most certainly did not knock it over myself!’ roared the Mcfarts. ‘How dare you suggest a thing like that! Speak up. Miss. Darling! You must have seen everything! Who knocked over my glass?’

‘None of the children did. Miss. Mcfarts.’ Miss. Darling answered. ‘I can vouch for it that nobody has moved from his or her desk all the time you've been here. except for Tom and he has not moved from his corner.’

Miss. Mcfarts glared at Miss. Darling. Miss. Darling met her gaze without flinching. ‘I am telling you the truth. Principal.’ she said. ‘You must have knocked it over without knowing it. That sort of thing is easy to do.’

‘I am fed up with you- a useless bunch of clown holes!’ Roared the Mcfarts. ‘I refuse to waste any more of my precious time here!’ And with that, she marched out of the classroom. slamming the door behind her.

In the stunned silence that followed. Miss. Darling walked up to the front of the class and stood behind her table. ‘Phew!’ she said. ‘I think we've had

enough school for one day. don't you? The class is to dismiss. You may all go out to the playground and wait for your parents to take you home.’

(The Second Miracle)

Martrace did not join the rush to get out of the classroom. After the other children had all disappeared. she remained at her desk. quiet and thoughtful. She knew she had to tell somebody about what had happened with the glass. She could not keep a gigantic secret like that bottled up inside her. What she needed was just one person. one wise and sympathetic grown-up who

could help her to understand the meaning of this extraordinary happening.

Neither her mother nor her father would be of any use at all. If they believed her story. and it was doubtful they would. they certainly would fail to realize what an astounding event it was that had taken place in the classroom that afternoon. Impulsively. Martrace decided that the one person she would like to confide in was Miss. Darling.

Martrace and Miss. Darling were now the only two lefts in the classroom. Miss. Darling had seated herself at her table and was rifling through some papers. She looked up and spoke.

‘Well; Martrace. aren't you going outside with the others?’

Martrace said. ‘Please, may I talk to you for a moment?’

‘Of course, you may. What's troubling you?’

‘Something very peculiar has happened to me. Miss. Darling.’

19

Miss. Darling became instantly alert. Ever since the two disastrous meetings she had had recently about Martrace. the first with the Headmistress and the second with the dreadful Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter. Miss. Darling had been

thinking a great deal about this child and wondering how she could help her. And now. here was Martrace sitting in the classroom with a curiously exalted look on her face and asking if she could have a private talk. Miss. Darling had never seen her looking so wide-eyed and peculiar before.

‘Yes. Martrace.’ she said. ‘Tell me what has happened to you that is so peculiar.’

‘Miss. Mcfarts isn't going to expel me. is she?’ Martrace asked. ‘Because it wasn't me who put that creature in her jug of water. I promise you it wasn't.’

‘I know it wasn't.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Am I going to be expelled?’

‘I think not.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘The Headmistress simply got a little over-excited. That’s all.’

‘Good.’ Martrace said. ‘But that isn't what I want to talk to you about.’

‘What do you want to talk to me about. Martrace?’

‘I want to talk to you about the glass of water with the creature in it.’ Martrace said. ‘You saw it spilling all over Miss. Mcfarts. didn't you?’

‘I did indeed.’

‘Well. Miss. Darling. I did not touch it. I never went near it.’

‘I know you didn't.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘You heard me telling the

Principal that it couldn't possibly have been you.’

‘Ah. but it was me. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘That's exactly what I want to talk to you about.’

Miss. Darling paused and looked carefully at the child. ‘I don't think I quite follow you.’ she said.

‘I got so angry at being accused of something I hadn't done that I made it happen.’

‘You made that happen. Martrace?’

‘I made the glass tip over.’

‘I still don't quite understand what you mean.’ Miss. Darling said gently.

‘I did it with my eyes.’ Martrace said. ‘I was staring at it and wishing it to tip and then my eyes went all hot and funny and some sort of power came out of them, and the glass just toppled over.’

Miss. Darling continued to look steadily at Martrace through her steel-rimmed spectacles and Martrace looked back at her just as steadily.

‘I am still not following you.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Do you mean you willed the glass to tip over?’

‘Yes.’ Martrace said. ‘With my eyes.’

Miss. Darling was silent for a moment. She did not think Martrace was meaning to tell a lie. It was more likely that she was simply allowing her vivid imagination to run away with her. ‘You mean you were sitting where you are

now, and you told the glass to topple over, and it did?'

'Something like that. Miss. Darling. yes.'

'If you did that. then it is just about the greatest miracle a person has ever performed since the time of Jesus.'

'I did it. Miss. Darling.'

It is extraordinary. thought Miss. Darling. How often do small children have flights of fancy like this? She decided to put an end to it as gently as possible. 'Could you do it again?' she asked. kindly.

'I don't know.' Martrace said. 'But I think I might be able to.'

Miss. Darling moved the now empty glass to the middle of the table. ‘Should I put water in it?’ she asked. smiling a little.

‘I don't think it matters.’ Martrace said.

‘Very well. then. Go ahead and tip it over.’

‘It may take some time.’

Take all the time you want.’ Miss. Darling said. I'm in no hurry.’

Martrace. Sitting in the second row about ten feet away from Miss. Darling. put her elbows on the desk and cupped her face in her hands. and this

time she gave the order right at the beginning. ‘Tip glass. tip!’ she ordered. but her lips did not move, and she made no sound. She simply shouted the words inside her head.

-And-

Now she concentrated the whole of her mind and her brain and her will up into her eyes and once again but much more quickly than before she felt the electricity gathering and the power was beginning to surge, and the hotness was coming into the eyeballs. and then the millions of tiny invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out towards the glass. and without making any sound at

all she kept on shouting inside her head for the glass to go over. She saw it wobble. then it tilted. Then it toppled right over and fell with a tinkle onto the tabletop not twelve inches from Miss. Darling's folded arms.

Miss. Darling's mouth dropped open and her eyes stretched so wide you could see the whites all around. She did not say a word. She could not. The shock of seeing the miracle performed had struck her dumb. She gaped at the glass. leaning far away from it now as though it might be a dangerous thing. Then slowly she lifted her head and looked at Martrace. She saw the child white in the

face. as white as paper. trembling all over. the eyes glazed. staring straight ahead and seeing nothing. The whole face was transfigured. her eyes round and bright and she was sitting there speechless. quite beautiful in a blaze of silence.

Miss. Darling waited. trembling a little herself and watching the child as she slowly stirred herself back into consciousness.

And then suddenly. click went her face into a look of almost seraphic calm. ‘I'm all right.’ she said and smiled. ‘I'm quite all right. Miss. Darling. So don't be alarmed.’

‘You seemed so far away.’ Miss. Darling whispered. awestruck.

‘Oh. I was. I was flying past the stars on silver wings.’

Martrace said. ‘It was wonderful.’

Miss. Darling was still gazing at the child in absolute wonderment. as though she were The Creation. The Beginning of The World. The First Morning.

‘It went much quicker this time.’ Martrace said quietly.

‘It's not possible!’ Miss. Darling was gasping. ‘I don't believe it! I simply don't believe it!’ She closed her eyes and

kept them closed for quite a while. and when she opened them again it seemed as though she had gathered herself together. ‘Would you like to come back and have tea at my cottage?’ she asked.

‘Oh. I'd love to.’ Martrace said.

‘Good. Gather up your things and I'll meet you outside in a couple of minutes.’

‘You won't tell anyone about this. this thing that I did. will you. Miss. Darling?’

‘I wouldn't dream of it.’ Miss. Darling said.

Miss. Darling's Cottage

Miss. Darling joined Martrace outside the school gates and the two of them walked in silence through the village Love Street. They passed the greengrocer with his window full of apples and oranges. and the butcher with bloody lumps of meat on display and naked chickens hanging up. and a small bank. and the grocery store and the electrical shop. and then they came out on the other side of the village onto the narrow country road where there were no people anymore and very few motor-cars.

-And-

Now that they were alone. Martrace suddenly became wildly

animated. It appears a valve had burst inside her and a great gush of energy was being released. She trotted beside Miss. Darling with wild little hops and her fingers flew as if she would scatter them to the four winds and her words went off like fireworks. with terrific speed. It was from Miss. Darling this and Miss. Darling that and Miss. Darling, I do honestly feel I could move anything in the world. not just tipping over glasses and trivial things like that. I feel I could topple tables and chairs. Miss. Darling. Even when people are sitting in the chairs, I think I could push them over. and bigger things too.

much bigger things than chairs and tables.

I only must take a moment to get my eyes strong and then I can push it out. this strongness. at anything at all so long as I am staring at it hard enough. I must stare at it extremely hard. Miss. Darling. extremely hard. and then I can feel it all happening behind my eyes. and my eyes get hot just as though they were burning but I do not mind that in the least. and Miss. Darling.

‘Calm yourself down. child. calm yourself down.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Let us not get ourselves too worked up so early in the proceedings.’

‘But you do think it is interesting. don't you? Miss. Darling?’

‘Oh. it is interesting all right.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘It is more than interesting. But we must tread very carefully from now on. Martrace.’

‘Why must we tread carefully. Miss. Darling?’

‘Because we are playing with mysterious forces. my child. that we know nothing about. I do not think they are evil. They may be good. They may even be divine. But whether they are or not. let us handle them carefully.’

These were wise words from a wise old bird. but Martrace was too steamed up to see it that way. ‘I don't see why we have to be so careful?’ she said. still hopping about.

‘I am trying to explain to you.’ Miss. Darling said patiently. ‘That we are dealing with the unknown. It is an unexplainable thing. The right word for it is a phenomenon. It is a phenomenon.’

‘Am I a phenomenon?’ Martrace asked.

‘It is quite possible that you are.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But I'd rather you didn't think about yourself as anything

now. What I thought we might do is to explore this phenomenon a little further. just the two of us together. but make sure we take things very carefully all the time.'

'You want me to do some more of it then. Miss. Darling?'

'That is what I am tempted to suggest.' Miss. Darling said cautiously.

'Goody-good.' Martrace said.

'I.' Miss. Darling said. 'I am probably far more bowled over by what you did than you are. and I am trying to find some reasonable explanation.'

'Such as what?' Martrace asked.

‘Such as whether or not it's got something to do with the fact that you are quite exceptionally precocious.’

‘What exactly does that word mean?’ Martrace said.

‘A precocious child.' Miss. Darling said. ‘Is one that shows amazing intelligence early on. You are an unbelievably precocious child.’

‘Am I really?’ Martrace asked.

‘Of course, you are. You must be aware of that. Look at what you are reading. Look at your mathematics.’

‘I suppose you're right.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling marveled at the child's lack of conceit and self-consciousness.

‘I can't help wondering.' she said. ‘Whether this sudden ability that has come to you. of being able to move an object without touching it. whether it might not have something to do with your brainpower.’

‘You mean there might not be room in my head for all those brains, so something has to push out?’

‘That's not quite what I mean.’ Miss. Darling said. smiling. ‘But whatever happens. and I say it again. We must

tread carefully from now on. I have not forgotten that strange and distant glimmer on your face after you tipped over the last glass.'

'Do you think doing it could hurt me? Is that what you are thinking? Miss. Darling?'

'It made you feel pretty peculiar. didn't it?'

'It made me feel lonely.' Martrace said. 'For a moment or two, I was flying past the stars on silver wings. I told you that. And intend to tell you something else. Miss. Darling? It was easier the second time. much easier. It is like

anything else. the more you practice it. the easier it gets.’

Miss. Darling was walking slowly so that the small child could keep up with her without trotting too fast. and it was very peaceful out there on the narrow road now that the village was behind them. It was one of those golden autumn afternoons and there were blackberries and splashes of old man's beard in the hedges. and the hawthorn berries were ripening scarlet for the birds when the chilly winter came along.

There were tall trees here and there on either side. oak, sycamore, and ash and occasionally a sweet chestnut.

Miss. Darling. wishing to change the subject for the moment. gave the names of all these to Martrace and taught her how to recognize them by the shape of their leaves and the pattern of the bark on their trunks. Martrace took all this in and stored the knowledge away carefully in her mind.

They came finally to a gap in the hedge on the left-hand side of the road where there was a five-barred gate. ‘This way.’ Miss.

Darling said. and she opened the gate and led Martrace through and closed it again. They were now walking along a narrow lane that was no more than a

rutted cart-track. There was a high hedge of hazel on either side, and you could see clusters of ripe brown nuts in their green jackets. The squirrels would be collecting them all very soon. Miss. Darling said. and storing them away carefully for the bleak months ahead.

'You mean you live down here?' Martrace asked.

'I do.' Miss. Darling replied. but she said no more.

Martrace had never once stopped to think about where Miss. Darling might be living. She had always regarded her purely as a teacher. a person who turned

up out of nowhere and taught at school and then went away again. Do any of us children. she wondered. ever stop to ask ourselves where our teachers go when school is over for the day? Do we wonder if they live alone? or if there is a mother at home, a sister, or a husband? ‘Do you live all by yourself? Miss. Darling?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Very much so.’

They were walking over the deep sunbaked mud-tracks of the lane, and you had to watch where you put your feet if you did not want to twist your ankle.

There were a few small birds around in the hazel branches but that was all.

‘It's just a farm laborer's cottage.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘You mustn't expect too much of it. We're nearly there.’

They came to a small green gate half-buried in the hedge on the right and almost hidden by the overhanging hazel branches. Miss. Darling paused with one hand on the gate and spoke. ‘There it is. That's where I live.’

Martrace saw a narrow dirt path leading to a tiny red-brick cottage. The cottage was so small it looked more like a doll's house than a human dwelling. The

bricks it was built of were old and crumbly and very pale red. It had a grey slate roof and one small chimney. and there were two little windows at the front.

Each window was no larger than a sheet of a tabloid newspaper and there was no upstairs to the place. On either side of the path, there was a wilderness of nettles and blackberry thorns and long brown grass. An enormous oak tree stood overshadowing the cottage. Its massive spreading branches seemed to be enfolding and embracing the tiny building. and hiding it as well from the rest of the world.

Miss. Darling. with one hand on the gate which she had not yet opened. turned to Martrace and spoke. ‘A poet called Dylan Thomas once wrote some lines that I think of every time I walk up this path.’

Martrace waited. and Miss. Darling. in a wonderful slow voice. began reciting the poem:

‘Never and never. my girl riding far and near in the land of the hearthstone tales. and spelled asleep.

Fear or believe that the wolf in the sheep-white hood Looping and

bleating roughly and blithely intends to leap. my dear. my dear.

Out of a lair in the flocked leaves in the dew-dipped year to eat your heart in the house in the rosy wood.’

There was a moment of silence. and Martrace. Who had never heard great romantic poetry spoken aloud? was profoundly moved. ‘It's like music.’ she whispered.

‘It is music.’ Miss. Darling said. And then. as though embarrassed at having revealed such a secret part of herself. she quickly pushed open the gate and walked up the path.

Martrace hung back. She was a bit frightened of this place now.

It seemed so unreal, remote, fantastic, and so away from this earth. It was like an illustration in Grimm or Hans Andersen. It was the house where the poor woodcutter lived with Hansel and Gretel and where Red Riding Hood's grandmother lived, and it was also the house of The Seven Dwarfs and The Three Bears and all the rest of them. It was straight out of a fairy-tale.

‘Come along. my dear.’ Miss. Darling called back. and Martrace followed her up the path.

The front door was covered with flaky green paint and there was no keyhole. Miss. Darling simply lifted the latch, pushed open the door, and went in. Although she was not a tall woman. She had to stoop low to get through the doorway. Martrace went after her and found herself in a dark narrow tunnel.

‘You can come through to the kitchen and help me make the tea.’ Miss. Darling said. and she led the way along the tunnel into the kitchen - that is if you could call it a kitchen. It was not much bigger than a good-sized clothes cupboard and there was one small

window in the back wall with a sink under the window.

But there were no taps over the sink. Against another wall, there was a shelf. to prepare food. and there was a single cupboard above the shelf. On the shelf itself there stood a Primus stove. a saucepan and a half-full bottle of milk. A Primus is a little camping-stove that you fill with paraffin, and you light it at the top and then you pump it to get pressure from the flame.

‘You can get me some water while I light the Primus.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘The well is out at the back. Take the bucket. Here it is. You will find a rope in

the well. Just hook the bucket onto the end of the rope and lower it down. but don't fall in yourself.’ Martrace. more bemused than ever now. took the bucket and carried it out into the back garden.

The well had a little wooden roof over it and a simple winding device and there was the rope dangling down into a dark bottomless hole. Martrace pulled up the rope and hooked the handle of the bucket onto the end of it. Then she lowered it until she heard a splash, and the rope went slack. She pulled it up again and lo and behold. There was water in the bucket.

‘Is that enough?’ she asked. carrying it in.

‘Just about.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I don't suppose you've ever done that before?’

‘Never.’ Martrace said. ‘It's fun. How do you get enough water for your bath?’

‘I don't take a bath.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I was standing up. I get a bucketful of water and I heat it on this little stove, and I strip and wash all over.’

‘Do you honestly do that?’ Martrace asked.

‘Of course, I do.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Every poor person in England used to wash that way until not so exceptionally long ago. And they did not have a Primus. They had to heat the water over the fire in the hearth.’

‘Are you poor? Miss. Darling?’

‘Yes.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Very. It is a good little stove. isn't it?’

The Primus was roaring away with a powerful blue flame and already the water in the saucepan was beginning to bubble. Miss. Darling got a teapot from the cupboard and put some tea leaves into it. She also found half a small loaf of

brown bread. She cut two thin slices and then. from a plastic container. She took some margarine and spread it on the bread.

Margarine. Martrace thought. She really must be poor.

Miss. Darling found a tray and on it, she put two mugs. the teapot. the half-bottle of milk and a plate with the two slices of bread. ‘I'm afraid I don't have any sugar.’ she said. ‘I never use it.’

‘That's all right.’ Martrace said. In her wisdom, she was aware of the delicacy of the situation, and she was

taking great care not to say anything to embarrass her companion.

‘Let us have it in the sitting-room.’ Miss. Darling said. picking up the tray and leading the way out of the kitchen and down the dark little tunnel into the room at the front. Martrace followed her. but just inside the doorway of the so-called sitting room she stopped and stared around her in absolute amazement. The room was as small and square and bare as a prison cell. The pale daylight that entered came from a single tiny window in the front wall. but there were no curtains. The only objects in the entire room were two upturned wooden

boxes to serve as chairs and a third box between them for a table. That was all.

There were no pictures on the walls. no carpet on the floor. only rough unpolished wooden planks. and there were gaps between the planks where dust and bits of grime had gathered. The ceiling was so low that with a jump Martrace could nearly touch it with her fingertips. The walls were white, but the whiteness did not look like paint. Martrace rubbed her palm against it and white powder came off onto her skin. It was a whitewash. the cheap stuff that is used in cowsheds, stables, and henhouses.

Martrace was appalled. Was this really where her neat and trimly dressed schoolteacher lived? Was this all she had to come back to after a day's work? It was unbelievable. And what was the reason for it? There was something very strange going on around here. surely.

Miss. Darling put the tray on one of the upturned boxes. ‘Sit down. my dear. sit down.’ she said. ‘And we'll have a nice hot cup of tea. Help yourself to bread. Both slices are for you. I never eat anything when I get home. I have a good old tuck-in at the school lunch and that keeps me going until the next morning.’

Martrace perched carefully on an upturned box and more out of politeness than anything else she took a slice of bread and margarine and started to eat it. At home, she would have been having buttered toast and strawberry jam and a piece of sponge-Cherry pie to round it off. And yet this was somehow far more fun. There was a mystery here in this house. a great mystery. There was no doubt about that. and Martrace was longing to find out what it was.

Miss. Darling poured the tea and added a little milk to both cups. She appeared to be not in the least ill at ease sitting on an upturned box in a bare room

and drinking tea out of a mug that she balanced on her knee.

‘You know.’ she said. ‘I've been thinking extremely hard about what you did with that glass. It is a great power you have been given. my child. you know that.’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling. I do.’ Martrace said. chewing her bread and margarine.

‘So far as I know.’ Miss. Darling went on. ‘Nobody else in the history of the world has been able to compel an object to move without touching it, blowing on it, or using any outside help at all.’

Martrace nodded but said nothing.

‘The fascinating thing.' Miss. Darling said. ‘Would be to find out the real limit of this power of yours. Oh. I know you think you can move about anything there is. but I have my doubts about that.’ ‘I'd love to try something huge.’ Martrace said.

‘What about the distance?’ Miss. Darling asked. ‘Would you always have to be close to the thing you were pushing?’

‘I simply don't know.’ Martrace said. ‘But it would be fun to find out.’

Miss. Darling's Story

‘We mustn't hurry this.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘So, let us have another cup of tea. And do eat that other slice of bread. You must be hungry.’

Martrace took the second slice and started eating it slowly. The margarine was not at all bad. She doubted whether she could have told the difference if she had not known. ‘Miss. Darling.’ she said suddenly. ‘Do they pay you very badly at our school?’

Miss. Darling looked up sharply. ‘Not too badly.’ she said. ‘I get about the same as the others.’

‘But it must still be extraordinarily little if you are so dreadfully poor.’ Martrace said. ‘Do all the teachers live like this. with no furniture and no kitchen stove and no bathroom?’

‘No. they don't.’ Miss. Darling said stiffly. ‘I just happen to be the exception.’

‘I expect you just happen to like living in an amazingly straightforward way.’ Martrace said. probing a little further. ‘It must make house cleaning an awful lot easier and you don't have furniture to polish or any of those silly little ornaments lying around that have to

be dusted every day. And I suppose if you do not have a fridge, you do not have to go out and buy all sorts of junky things like eggs and mayonnaise and ice cream to fill it up with. It must save a terrific lot of shopping.'

At this point, Martrace noticed that Miss. Darling's face had gone all tight and peculiar-looking. Her whole body had become rigid. Her shoulders were hunched up high and her lips were pressed together tightly, and she sat there gripping her mug of tea in both hands and staring down into it as though searching for a way to answer these not-quite-so-innocent questions.

There followed a long and embarrassing silence. In the space of thirty seconds, the atmosphere in the tiny room had changed completely and now it was vibrating with awkwardness and secrets.

Martrace said. ‘I am deeply sorry I asked you those questions. Miss. Darling. It is not any of my business.’

At this. Miss. Darling seemed to rouse herself. She gave a shake of her shoulders and then very carefully she placed her mug on the tray.

‘Why shouldn't you ask?’ she said. ‘You were bound to ask in the end. You

are much too bright not to have wondered. I even wanted to ask you. That is why I invited you here. You are the first visitor to come to the cottage since I moved in two years ago.'

Martrace said nothing. She could feel the tension growing and growing in the room.

'You are so much wiser than your years. my dear.' Miss. Darling went on. 'That it quite staggers me. Although you look like a child. You are not a child at all because your mind and your powers of reasoning are fully grown-up. So, I suppose we might call you a grown-up child. if you see what I mean.'

Martrace still did not say anything. She was waiting for what was coming next.

‘Up to now.' Miss. Darling went on. ‘I have found it impossible to talk to anyone about my problems. I could not face the embarrassment. and anyway, I lack courage. Any courage I had was knocked out of me when I was young. But now. Suddenly, I have a desperate wish to tell everything to somebody. I know you are only a tiny little girl. but there is magic in you somewhere. I've seen it with my own eyes.’

Martrace became very alert. The voice she was hearing was surely crying out for help. It must be. It had to be.

Then the voice spoke again. ‘Have some more tea.’ it said.

‘I think there's still a drop left.’

Martrace nodded.

Miss. Darling poured tea into both mugs and added milk. Again, she cupped her mug in both hands and sat there sipping.

There was quite a long silence before she said. ‘May I tell you a story?’

‘Of course.’ Martrace said.

‘I am twenty-three years old.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘And when I was born my father was a doctor in this village. We had a nice old house. quite large. red brick. It is tucked away in the woods behind the hills. I don't think you'd know it.’

Martrace kept silent.

‘I was born there.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘And then came the first tragedy. My mother died when I was two. My father. a busy doctor. had to have someone to run the house and to look after me. So, he invited my mother's unmarried sister. my aunt. to come and live with us. She agreed and she came.’

Martrace was listening intently. ‘How old was the aunt when she moved in?’ she asked.

‘Not incredibly old.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I should say about thirty. But I hated her right from the start. I missed my mother terribly. And the aunt was not a kind person. My father did not know that because he was hardly ever around but when he did put on an appearance. the aunt behaved differently.’

Miss. Darling paused and sipped her tea. ‘I can't think why I am telling you all this.’ she said. embarrassed.

‘Go on.’ Martrace said. ‘Please.’

‘Well.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Then came the second tragedy. When I was five. my father died very suddenly. One day he was there and the next day he was gone. And so, I was left to live alone with my aunt. She became my legal guardian. She had all the powers of a parent over me. And in some way or another. she became the actual owner of the house.’

‘How did your father die?’ Martrace asked.

‘It is interesting you should ask that.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I was much too young to question it at the time. but I found out later that there was a good deal of mystery surrounding his death.’

‘Didn't they know how he died?’ Martrace asked.

‘Well. not exactly.’ Miss. Darling said. hesitating. ‘You see. no one could believe that he would ever have done it. He was such a very sane and sensible man.’

‘Done what?’ Martrace asked.

‘Killed himself.’

Martrace was stunned. ‘Did he?’ she gasped.

‘That's what it looked like.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But who knows?’ She shrugged and turned away and stared out of the tiny window.

‘I know what you're thinking.’ Martrace said. ‘You're thinking that the aunt killed him and made it look as though he'd done it himself.’

‘I am not thinking anything.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘One must never think things like that without proof.’

The little room became quiet. Martrace noticed that the hands clasping the mug were trembling slightly. ‘What happened after that?’ she asked. ‘What happened when you were left all alone with the aunt? Wasn't she nice to you?’

‘Nice?’ Miss. Darling said. ‘She was a demon. As soon as my father was

out of the way she became a holy terror. My life was a nightmare.'

'What did she do to you?' Martrace asked.

'I don't want to talk about it.' Miss. Darling said. 'It's too horrible. But in the end, I became so frightened of her I used to start shaking when she came into the room. You must understand I was never a strong character like you. I was always shy and retiring.'

'Didn't you have any other relations?' Martrace asked. 'Any uncles, aunts, or grannies who would see you?' 'None that I knew about.' Miss. Darling

said. ‘They were all either dead or they'd gone to Australia. And that is still the way it is now. I'm afraid.’

‘So, you grew up in that house alone with your aunt.’

Martrace said. ‘But you must have gone to school.’

‘Of course.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I went to the same school you're going to know. But I lived at home.’ Miss. Darling paused and stared down into her empty tea-mug. ‘I think what I am trying to explain to you.’ she said. ‘Is that over the years I

became so completely cowed and dominated by this monster of an aunt that when she gave me an order. no matter what it was. I obeyed it instantly. That can happen. you know. And by the time I was ten. I had become her slave. I did all the housework. I made her bed. I washed and ironed for her. I did all the cooking. I learned how to do everything.'

'But surely you could have complained to somebody?' Martrace said.

'To whom?' Miss. Darling said. 'And anyway. I was far too terrified to complain. I told you. I was her slave.'

'Did she beat you?'

‘Let us not go into details.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘How simply awful.’ Martrace said. ‘Did you cry nearly all the time?’

‘Only when I was alone.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I wasn't allowed to cry in front of her. But I lived in fear.’

‘What happened when you left school?’ Martrace asked.

‘I was a bright pupil.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I could easily have got into university. But there was no question about that.’

‘Why not. Miss. Darling?’

‘Because I was needed at home to do the work.’

‘Then how did you become a teacher?’ Martrace asked.

‘There is a Teacher's Training College in Reading.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That's only forty minutes' bus-ride away from here. I was allowed to go there on the condition I came straight home again every afternoon to do the washing and ironing and to clean the house and cook the supper.’

‘How old were you then?’ Martrace asked.

‘When I went into Teacher's Training, I was eighteen.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘You could have just packed up and walked away.’ Martrace said.

‘Not until I got a job.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘And don't forget. I was by then dominated by my aunt to such an extent that I would not have dared. You cannot imagine what it is like to be completely controlled like that by an extraordinarily strong personality. It turns you into jelly. So that is it. That is the sad story of my life.

Now I've talked enough.’

‘Please don't stop.’ Martrace said. ‘You haven't finished yet. How did you manage to get away from her in the end and come and live in this funny little house?’

‘Ah. that was something.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I was proud of that.’

‘Tell me.’ Martrace said.

‘Well.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘When I got my teacher's job. The aunt told me I owed her a lot of money. I asked her why. She spoke. 'Because I've been feeding you for all these years and buying your shoes and your clothes!' She told me it added up to thousands and I had to pay her back by

giving her my salary for the next ten years. I'll give you one pound a week pocket-money.' she said. 'But that's all you're going to get.' She even arranged with the school authorities to have my salary paid directly into her bank. She made me sign the paper.'

'You shouldn't have done that.' Martrace said. 'Your salary was your chance of freedom.'

'I know. I know.' Miss. Darling said. 'But by then I had been her slave nearly all my life and I hadn't the courage or the guts to say no.

I was still petrified of her. She could still hurt me badly.'

'So how did you manage to escape?' Martrace asked.

'Ah.' Miss. Darling said. smiling for the first time. 'That was two years ago. It was my greatest triumph.'

'Please tell me.' Martrace said.

'I used to get up exceedingly early and go for walks while my aunt was still asleep.' Miss. Darling said. 'And one day I came across this tiny cottage. It was empty. I found out who owned it. It was a farmer. I went to see him. Farmers also get up exceedingly early. He was milking

his cows. I asked him if I could rent his cottage. 'You can't live there!' he cried. It is no convenience. no running water; no nothing!' ‘

‘'I want to live there.' I spoke. I am romantic. I have fallen in love with it. Please lend it to me.'

‘'You're mad.' he said. 'But if you insist. You're welcome to it. The rent will be ten pence a week.'

‘'Here's one month's rent in advance.' I spoke. giving him 40p. 'And thank you so much!'’

‘How super!’ Martrace cried. ‘So suddenly you had a house all of your own!

But how did you pluck up the courage to tell the aunt?’

‘That was tough.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But I steeled myself to do it. One night. after I had cooked her supper. I went upstairs and packed the few things I possessed in a cardboard box and came downstairs and announced I was leaving. 'I've rented a house.' I spoke.

‘My aunt exploded. 'Rented a house!' she shouted. 'How can you rent a house when you have only one pound a week in the world?'

‘'I've done it.' I spoke.

''And how are you going to buy food for yourself?'

''I'll manage.' I mumbled and rushed out of the front door.' 'Oh. well, done you!' Martrace cried. 'So, you were free at last!'

'I was free at last.' Miss. Darling said. 'I can't tell you how wonderful it was.'

'But have you managed to live here on one pound a week for two years?' Martrace asked.

'I most certainly have.' Miss. Darling said. 'I pay ten pence rent. And the rest about buys me paraffin for my

stove and my lamp and a little milk and tea and bread and margarine. That is all I need really. As I told you. I have a jolly good tuck-in at the school lunch.'

Martrace stared at her. What a marvelously brave thing Miss. Darling had done. Suddenly she was a hero in Martrace's eyes. 'Isn't it awfully cold in the winter?' she asked.

'I've got my little paraffin stove.' Miss. Darling said. 'You'd be surprised how snug I can make it in here.'

'Do you have a bed? Miss. Darling?'

‘Well not exactly.’ Miss. Darling said. smiling again. ‘But they say it's extremely healthy to sleep on a solid surface.’

All at once, Martrace was able to see the whole situation with absolute clarity. Miss. Darling needed help. There was no way she could go on existing like this indefinitely. ‘You would be a lot better off. Miss. Darling.’ she said. ‘If you gave up your job and drew unemployment money.’

‘I would never do that.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I love teaching.’

‘This awful aunt.’ Martrace said. ‘I suppose she is still living in your lovely old house?’

‘Very much so.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘She's still only about fifty.

She'll be around for a long time yet.’

‘And do you think your father meant her to own the house forever?’

‘I'm quite sure he didn't.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Parents will often give a guardian the right to occupy the house for a certain length of time. but it is always left in trust for the child. It then becomes

the child's property when he or she grows up.’

‘Then surely it is your house?’ Martrace said.

‘My father's will be never found.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘It looks as though somebody destroyed it.’ ‘No prizes for guessing who.’ Martrace said.

‘No prizes.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘But if there is no will. Miss. Darling. then surely the house goes automatically to you. You are the next of kin.’

‘I know I am.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But my aunt produced a piece of paper

supposedly written by my father saying that he leaves the house to his sister-in-law in return for her kindness in looking after me. I am certain it is a forgery. But no one can prove it.'

'Couldn't you try?' Martrace said. 'Couldn't you hire a good lawyer and make a fight of it.'

'I don't have the money to do that.' Miss. Darling said. 'And you must remember that this aunt of mine is a much-respected figure in the community. She has a lot of influence.'

'Who is she?' Martrace asked.

Miss. Darling hesitated a moment. Then she said softly.

‘Miss. Mcfarts.’

The Names

‘Miss. Mcfarts!’ Martrace cried. jumping about a foot in the air. ‘You mean she is your aunt? She brought you up?’

‘Yes.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘No wonder you were terrified!’ Martrace cried. ‘The other day we saw her grab a girl by the pigtails and throw her over the playground fence!’

‘You haven't seen anything.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘After my father died. when I

was five and a half. She used to make me bathe myself all alone. And if she came up and thought I had not washed properly she would push my head under the water and hold it there. But do not get me started on what she used to do. That won't help us at all.’

‘No.’ Martrace said. ‘It won't.’

‘We came here.' Miss. Darling said.’ to talk about you and I've been talking about nothing but myself the whole time. I feel like a fool. I am much more interested in just how much you can do with those amazing eyes of yours.’

‘I can move things.’ Martrace said. ‘I know I can. I can push things over.’

‘How would you like it.' Miss. Darling said. ‘If we made some overly cautious experiments to see just how much you can move and push?’

Quite surprisingly. Martrace said. ‘If you don't mind. Miss. Darling. I think I would rather not. I want to go home now and think and think about all the things I've heard this afternoon.’

Miss. Darling stood up at once. ‘Of course.’ she said. ‘I have kept you

here far too long. Your mother will be starting to worry.’

‘She never does that.’ Martrace said. smiling. ‘But I would like to go home now, please. if you don't mind.’

‘Come along then.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I'm sorry I gave you such a rotten tea.’

‘You didn't at all.’ Martrace said. ‘I loved it.’

The two of them walked to Martrace's house in complete silence. Miss. Darling sensed that Martrace wanted it that way. The child seemed so lost in thought she hardly looked where

she was walking. and when they reached the gate of Martrace's home. Miss. Darling said. ‘You had better forget everything I told you this afternoon.’

‘I won't promise to do that.’ Martrace said. ‘But I will promise not to talk about it to anyone anymore. not even to you.’

‘I think that would be wise.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘I won't promise to stop thinking about it. though. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘I've been thinking about it back from your cottage and I've got just a tiny little bit of an idea.’

‘You mustn't.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Please forget it.’

‘I would like to ask you three last things before I stop talking about it.’ Martrace said. ‘Please, will you answer them? Miss. Darling?’

Miss. Darling smiled. It was extraordinary. she told herself. how this little snippet of a girl seemed suddenly to be taking charge of her problems. and with such authority. too. ‘Well.’ she said. ‘That depends on what the questions are.’

‘The first thing is this.’ Martrace said. ‘What did Miss. Mcfarts call your

father when they were around the house at home?’

‘I'm sure she called him Magnus.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That was his first name.’

‘And what did your father call Miss. Mcfarts?’

‘Her name is Agatha.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That's what he would have called her.’

‘And lastly.’ Martrace said. ‘What did your father and Miss. Mcfarts call you around the house?’

‘They called me Jenny.’ Miss. Darling said.

Martrace pondered these answers very carefully. ‘Let me make sure I've got them right.’ she said. ‘In the house at home. Your father was Magnus. Miss. Mcfarts was Agatha, and you were Jenny. Am I right?’

‘That is correct.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Thank you.’ Martrace said. ‘And now I won't mention the subject anymore.’

Miss. Darling wondered what was going on in the mind of this child. ‘Don't do anything silly.’ she said.

Martrace laughed and turned away and ran up the path to her front door. calling out as she went. ‘Good-bye. Miss.

Darling! Thank you so much for the tea.’

(The Practice)

Martrace found the house empty as usual. Her father was not yet back from work. Her mother was not yet back from bingo and her brother might be anywhere. She went straight into the living room and opened the drawer of the sideboard where she knew her father kept a box of cigars. She took one out and

carried it up to her bedroom and shut herself in.

Now for practice. she told herself. It is going to be tough. but I am determined to do it.

Her plan for helping Miss. Darling was beginning to form beautifully in her mind. She had it now in every detail. But in the end, it all depended upon her being able to do one incredibly special thing with her eye-power. She knew she would not manage it right away. but she felt confident that with a great deal of practice and effort. she would succeed in the end. The cigar was essential. It was a bit thicker than she

would have liked. but the weight was about right. It would be fine for practicing with.

There was a small dressing-table in Martrace's bedroom with her hairbrush and comb on it and two library books. She cleared these things to one side and laid the cigar down in the middle of the dressing-table. Then she walked away and sat at the end of her bed. She was now about ten feet from the cigar.

She settled herself and began to concentrate. and very quickly this time she felt the electricity beginning to flow inside her head. gathering itself behind the eyes. and the eyes became hot and

millions of tiny invisible hands began pushing out like sparks towards the cigar. ‘Move!’ she whispered. and to her intense surprise. at once. the cigar with its little red and gold paper band around its middle rolled away across the top of the dressing-table and fell onto the carpet.

Martrace had enjoyed that. It was lovely doing it. It had felt as though sparks were going round and round inside her head and flashing out of her eyes. It had given her a sense of power that was almost ethereal. And how quick it had been this time! How simple!

She crossed the bedroom, picked up the cigar, and put it back on the table.

Now for the difficult one. she thought. But if I have the power to push. then surely, I also have the power to lift. I must learn how to lift it. I must learn how to lift it right up into the air and keep it there. It is not a very heavy thing. a cigar.

She sat at the end of the bed and started again. It was easy now to summon up the power behind her eyes. It was like pushing a trigger in the brain. ‘Lift!’ she whispered. ‘Lift! Lift!’

At first, the cigar started to roll away. But then. with Martrace concentrating fiercely. one end of it slowly lifted about an inch off the tabletop.

With a colossal effort. She managed to hold it there for about ten seconds. Then it fell back again.

‘Phew!’ she gasped. ‘I'm getting it! I'm starting to do it!’

For the next hour. Martrace kept practicing. and in the end, she had managed. by the sheer power of her eyes. to lift the whole cigar, clear off the table about six inches into the air and hold it there for about a minute. Then suddenly she was so exhausted she fell back on the bed and went to sleep.

That was how her mother found her later in the evening.

‘What's the matter with you?’ the mother said. waking her up. ‘Are you ill?’

‘Oh gosh.’ Martrace said. sitting up and looking around. ‘No. I am all right. I was a bit tired. That’s all.’

From then on. every day after school. Martrace shut herself in her room and practiced with the cigar. And soon it all began to come together most wonderfully. Six days later. by the following Wednesday evening. She was able not only to lift the cigar up into the air but also to move it around exactly as she wished. It was beautiful. ‘I can do it!’ she cried. ‘I can do it! I can pick the cigar

up just with my eye power and push it and pull it in the air any way I want!’

All she had to do now was to put her great plan into action.

(The Third Miracle)

The next day was Thursday. and that. as the whole of Miss. Darling's class knew. was the day on which the Headmistress would take charge of the first lesson after lunch.

In the morning Miss. Darling said to them. ‘One or two of you did not particularly enjoy the last occasion when the Headmistress took the class; so, let us

all try to be especially careful and clever today.

How are your ears? Jennie. after your last encounter with Miss. Mcfarts?'

'She stretched them.' Jennie said. 'My mother said she's positive they are bigger than they were.'

'And Graceie.' Miss. Darling said. 'I am glad to see you didn't lose any of your hair after last Thursday.'

'My head was jolly sore afterward.' Graceie said.

'And you. Tom.' Miss. Darling said. 'Do please try not to be smart-aleck with the Headmistress today. You were

quite cheeky to her last week.’ ‘I hate her.’ Tom said.

‘Try not to make it so obvious.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘It doesn't pay. She is an extraordinarily strong woman. She has muscles like steel ropes.’

‘I wish I were grown up.’ Tom said. ‘I'd knock her flat.’

‘I doubt you would.’ Miss. Darling said. ''No one has ever got the better of her yet.’

‘What will she be testing us on this afternoon?’ a small girl asked.

‘Almost certainly the three-times table.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘That's what you are all meant to have learned this past week.

Make sure you know it.’

Lunch came and went.

After lunch. the class reassembled. Miss. Darling stood at one side of the room. They all sat silent. apprehensive. waiting. And then. like some giant of doom. The enormous Mcfarts strode into the room in her green breeches and cotton smock. She went straight to her jug of water and lifted it by the handle and peered inside.

‘I am glad to see.' she said. ‘That there are no slimy creatures in my

drinking-water this time. If there had been. Then something exceptionally unpleasant would have happened to every single member of this class. And that includes you. Miss. Darling.'

The class remained silent and very tense. They had learned a bit about this tigress by now and nobody was about to take any chances.

'Very well.' boomed the Mcfarts. 'Let us see how well you know your three-times table. Or to put it another way. let us see how badly Miss. Darling has taught you the three-times table.' The Mcfarts were standing in front of the class. legs

apart. hands-on-hips. scowling at Miss. Darling stood silent to one side.

Martrace. sitting motionless at her desk in the second row. was watching things very closely.

‘You!’ the Mcfarts shouted. pointing a finger, the size of a rolling-pin at a boy called will Edward; will Edward was on the extreme right of the front row. ‘Stand up. you!’ she shouted at him.

Will Edward have stood up?

‘Recite the three-times table backward!’ the Mcfarts barked.

‘Backwards?’ stammered will Edward. ‘But I haven't learned it backward.’

‘There you are!’ cried the Mcfarts. triumphant. ‘She's taught you nothing! Miss. Darling. why have you taught them absolutely nothing at all in the last week?’

‘That is not true. Principal.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘They have all learned their three-times table. But I see no point in teaching them backward. There is little point in teaching anything backward. The whole object of life. Principal. is to go forward. I venture to ask whether even you. for example. can spell a simple word

like wrong backward straight away. I very much doubt it.’

‘Don't you get impertinent with me? Miss. Darling!’ the Mcfarts snapped. Then she turned back to the unfortunate will Edward. ‘Very well. boy.’ she said. ‘Answer me this. I have seven apples. seven oranges and seven bananas. How many pieces of fruit do I have altogether? Hurry up! Get on with it!

Give me the answer!’

‘That's adding up!’ will Edward cry. ‘That isn't the three times table!’

‘You are blithering idiot!’ shouted the Mcfarts. You are festering gumboil!

You were- a flea-bitten fungus! That is the three times table! You have three separate lots of fruit, and each lot has seven pieces. Three sevens are twenty-one. Can't you see that? Your stagnant cesspool! I will give you one more chance. I have eight coconuts. eight monkey-nuts and eight nutty little idiots like you. How many nuts do I have altogether? Answer me quickly.'

Poor Edward was properly flustered. 'Wait!' he cried. 'Please wait! I've got to add up eight coconuts and eight monkey-nuts…' He started counting on his fingers.

‘You are bursting blister!’ yelled the Mcfarts. ‘You motheaten maggot! This is not adding up! This is multiplication! The answer is three eights! Or is it eight threes? What is the difference between the three eights and eight threes? Tell me that. You mangled a little while and look sharp about it!’

By now Edward was far too frightened and bewildered even to speak.

In two strides the Mcfarts was beside him. and by some amazing gymnastic trick. It may have been judo or karate. She flipped the back of Edward's legs with one of her feet so that the boy shot up off the ground and turned a

somersault in the air. But halfway through the somersault she caught him by an ankle and held him dangling upside-down like a plucked chicken in a shopwindow.

‘Eight threes.’ the Mcfarts shouted. swinging Edward from side to side by his ankle. ‘Eight threes are the same as three eights and three eights are twenty-four! Repeat that!’

At exactly that moment Tom. at the other end of the room.

Jumped to his feet and started pointing excitedly at the blackboard and

screaming. ‘The chalk! The chalk! Look at the chalk! It's moving all on its own!’

So, hostel...

l and shrill was Tom's scream that everyone in the place, including the Mcfarts, looked up at the blackboard. And there. sure enough. a brand-new piece of chalk was hovering near the grey-black writing surface of the blackboard.

‘It's writing something!’ screamed Tom. ‘The chalk is writing something!’

And indeed. it was.

‘What the blazes are this?’ Yelled the Mcfarts. It had shaken her to see her

first name was written like that by an invisible hand. She dropped Edward onto the floor.

Then she yelled at nobody. ''Who's doing this?

Who is writing it?

The chalk continued to write.

Everyone in the place heard the gasp that came from the Mcfarts's throat. ‘No!’ she cried. ‘It can't be! It can't be Magnus!’

Miss. Darling. at the side of the room glanced swiftly at Martrace.

The child was sitting very straight at her desk. the head held high. the mouth compressed. the eyes glittering like two stars.

For some reason, everyone now looked at the Mcfarts. The woman's face had turned white as snow and her mouth was opening and shutting like a halibut out of the water and giving out a series of strangled gasps.

The chalk stopped writing. It hovered for a few moments. then suddenly it dropped to the floor with a tinkle and broke in two. will Edward. who had managed to resume his seat in the

front row? screamed. ‘Miss. Mcfarts has fallen! Miss. Mcfarts is on the floor!’

This was the most sensational bit of news of all, and the entire class jumped up out of their seats to have a good look. And there she was. the huge figure of the Headmistress. stretched full-length on her back across the floor. out for the count.

Miss. Darling ran forward and knelt beside the prostrate giant. ‘She's fainted!’ she cried. ‘She's out cold! Someone fetches the matron at once.’ Three children ran out of the room.

Tom. always ready for action. leaped up and seized the big jug of water.

‘My father says chilly water is the best way to wake up someone who's fainted.’ he said. and with that, he tipped the entire contents of the jug over the Mcfarts's head. No one. not even Miss. Darling. protested.

As for Martrace. she continued to sit motionless at her desk. She was feeling curiously elated. She felt as though she had touched something that was not of this world. the highest point of the heavens. the farthest star. She had felt most wonderfully the power surging up behind her eyes. gushing like a warm fluid inside her skull. and her eyes had become scorching hot. hotter than ever

before. and things had come bursting out of her eye-sockets and then the piece of chalk had lifted itself and had begun to write. It appears she had hardly done anything. it had all been so simple.

The school matron. followed by five teachers. three women and two men. came rushing into the room.

‘By golly. somebody's floored her at last!’ cried one of the men. grinning. ‘Congratulations. Miss. Darling!’ ‘Who threw the water over her?’ asked the matron.

‘I did.’ said Tom proudly.

‘Good for you.’ another teacher said. ‘Intend to get some more?’

‘Stop that.’ the matron said. ‘We must carry her up to the sickroom.’

It took all five teachers and the matron to lift the enormous woman and stagger with her out of the room.

Miss. Darling said to the class. ‘I think you'd all better go out to the playground and amuse yourselves until the next lesson.’ Then she turned and walked over to the blackboard and carefully wiped out all the chalk writing.

The children began filing out of the classroom. Martrace started to go

with them. but as she passed Miss. Darling, she paused and her twinkling eyes met the teacher's eyes, and Miss. Darling ran forward and gave the tiny child a great big hug and a kiss.

A New Home

Later that day. the news began to spread that the Headmistress had recovered from her fainting-fit and had then marched out of the school building tight-lipped and white in the face.

The next morning, she did not turn up at school. At lunchtime. Mr. Trilby. the Deputy Head. telephoned her

house to inquire if she was feeling unwell. There was no answer to the phone.

When school was over. Mr. Trilby decided to investigate further. So, he walked to the house where Miss. Mcfarts lived on the edge of the village. the lovely small red-brick Georgian building is known as The Red House. tucked away in the woods behind the hills.

He rang the bell. No answer.

He knocked loudly. No answer.

He called out. ‘Is anybody at home?’ No answer.

He tried the door and to his surprise found it unlocked. He went in.

The house was silent and there was no one in it. and yet all the furniture was still in place. Mr. Trilby went upstairs to the main bedroom. Here also everything was normal until he started opening drawers and looking into cupboards.

There were no clothes, underclothes, or shoes anywhere.

They had all gone.

She has done a bunk. Mr. Trilby said to himself, and he went away to inform the School Governors that the Headmistress had vanished.

On the second morning. Miss. Darling received by registered post a letter from a firm of local solicitors informing her that the last will of her late father. Dr. Darling. had suddenly and mysteriously turned up. This document revealed that ever since her father's death. Miss. Darling had been the rightful owner of a property on the edge of the village known as The Red House. Which until recently had been occupied by Miss Agatha Mcfarts. This will also show that her father's lifetime savings. Fortunately, we are still safely in the bank. had also been left to her. The solicitor's letter added that if Miss. Darling would kindly

call into the office as soon as possible. then the property and the money could be transferred into her name very rapidly.

Miss. Darling did just that. and within a couple of weeks, she had moved into the Red House. the very place in which she had been brought up and where luckily all the family furniture and pictures were still around. From then on. Martrace was a welcome visitor to The Red House every single evening after school. and a close friendship began to develop between the teacher and the small child.

Back at school. Momentous changes were also taking place. As soon

as it became clear that Miss. Mcfarts had completely disappeared from the scene. The excellent Mr. Trilby was appointed Head Teacher in her place. And very soon after that. Martrace was moved up into the top from where Miss. Plimsoll quickly discovered that this amazing child was every bit as bright as Miss. Darling had said.

One evening a few weeks later. Martrace was having tea with Miss. Darling in the kitchen of The Red House after school as they always did. when Martrace said suddenly. ‘Something strange has happened to me. Miss. Darling.’

‘Tell me about it.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘This morning.’ Martrace said. ‘Just for fun I tried to push something over with my eyes and I couldn't do it. Nothing moved. I did not even feel the hotness building up behind my eyeballs. The power had gone. I think I've lost it completely.’

Miss. Darling carefully buttered a slice of brown bread and put a little strawberry jam on it. ‘I've been expecting something like that to happen.’ she said.

‘You have? Why?’ Martrace asked.

‘Well.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘it's only a guess. but here is what I think. While you were in my class you had nothing to do. nothing to make you struggle. Your enormous brain was going crazy with frustration. It was bubbling and boiling away like mad inside your head. There was tremendous energy bottled up in there with nowhere to go. and somehow or other you were able to shoot that energy out through your eyes and make objects move. But now things are different. You are in the top form competing against children more than twice your age and all that mental energy is being used up in class. Your brain is for

the first time having to struggle and strive and keep busy. which is great. That is only a theory. mind you. and it may be a silly one. but I don't think it's far off the mark.’

‘I'm glad it's happened.’ Martrace said. ‘I wouldn't want to go through life as a miracle-worker.’

‘You've done enough.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I can still hardly believe you made all this happen for me.’

Martrace. who was perched on a high stool at the kitchen table? ate her bread and jam slowly. She did so love these afternoons with Miss. Darling. She

felt completely comfortable in her presence. and the two of them talked to each other for generations.

‘Did you know?' Martrace said suddenly. ‘That the heart of a mouse beats at the rate of six hundred and fifty times a second?’

‘I did not.’ Miss. Darling said smiling. ‘How fascinating. Where did you read that?’

‘In a book from the library.’ Martrace said. ‘And that means it goes so fast you can't even hear the separate beats. It must sound just like a buzz.’

‘It must.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘And how fast do you think a hedgehog's heart beats?’

Martrace asked.

‘Tell me.’ Miss. Darling said. smiling again.

‘It's not as fast as a mouse.’ Martrace said. ‘It's three hundred times a minute. But even so. You would not have thought it went as fast as that in a creature that moves so slowly. Would you. Miss. Darling?’

‘I certainly wouldn't.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Tell me one more.’

‘A horse.’ Martrace said. ‘That's slow. It's only forty times a minute.’

This child. Miss. Darling told herself. seems to be interested in everything. When one is with her it is impossible to be bored. I love it.

The two of them stayed sitting and talking in the kitchen for an hour or so longer. and then. at about six o'clock. Martrace said goodnight and set out to walk home to her parent's house. which was about an eight-minute journey away. When she arrived at her gate. She saw a large black Mercedes motorcar parked outside. She did not take too much notice of that. There were often strange cars parked outside her father's place. But when she entered the house. She was

confronted by a scene of utter chaos. Her mother and father were both in the hall frantically stuffing clothing and various objects into suitcases.

‘What on the earth's going on?’ she cried. ‘What's happening. daddy?’

‘We're off.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. not looking up. ‘We're leaving for the airport in half an hour, so you'd better get packed. Your brother's upstairs already to go. Get a move on. girl! Get going!’

‘Off?’ Martrace cried out. ‘Where to?’

‘Spain.’ the father said. ‘It's a better climate than this lousy country.’

‘Spain!’ Martrace cried. ‘I don't want to go to Spain! I love it here and I love my school!’

‘Just do as you're told and stop arguing.’ the father snapped. ‘I've got enough troubles without messing about with you!’

‘But daddy.’ Martrace began.

‘Shut up!’ the father shouted. ‘We're leaving in thirty minutes!

I'm not Missing that plane!’

‘But how long for. daddy?’ Martrace cried. ‘When are we coming back?’

‘We aren't.’ the father said. ‘Now beat it! I'm busy!’

Martrace turned away from him and walked out through the open front door. As soon as she was on the road she began to run. She headed straight back towards Miss. Darling's house, and she reached it in less than four minutes. She flew up the drive and suddenly she saw Miss. Darling in the front garden. standing in the middle of a bed of roses doing something with a pair of clippers. Miss. Darling had heard Martrace's feet racing over the gravel and now she straightened up and turned and stepped

out of the rose-bed as the child came running up.

‘My. my!’ she said. ‘What in the world is the matter?’

Martrace stood before her. panting. out of breath. Her small face flushed crimson all over.

‘They're leaving!’ she cried. ‘They've all gone mad and they're filling their suitcases and they're leaving for Spain in about thirty minutes!’

‘Who is?’ Miss. Darling asked quietly.

‘Mummy and daddy and my brother Mike and they say I've got to go with them!’

‘You mean for a holiday?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘Forever!’ Martrace cried. ‘Daddy said we were never coming back!’

There was a brief silence. then Miss. Darling said. ‘Actually, I'm not incredibly surprised.’

‘You mean you knew they were going?’ Martrace cried.

‘Why didn't you tell me?’

‘No. darling.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I did not know they were going.

But the news still doesn't surprise me.’

‘Why?’ Martrace cried. ‘Please tell me why.’ She was still out of breath from the running and the shock of it all.

‘Because of your father.' Miss. Darling said. ‘Is in with a bunch of crooks. Everyone in the village knows that. He is a receiver of stolen cars from all over the country. He's in it deep.’ Martrace stared at her open-mouthed.

Miss. Darling went on. ‘People brought stolen cars to your father's

workshop where he changed the number-plates and resprayed the bodies and assorted color and all the rest of it.’

-And-

‘Now somebody's probably tipped him off that the police are on to him and he's doing what they all do. running off to Spain where they cannot get him. He will have been sending his money out there for years. all ready and waiting for him to arrive.’

They were standing on the lawn in front of the lovely redbrick house with its weathered old red tiles and its tall chimneys. and Miss. Darling still had the

pair of garden clippers in one hand. It was a warm golden evening, and a blackbird was singing somewhere nearby.

‘I don't want to go with them!’ Martrace shouted suddenly.

‘I won't go with them.’

‘I'm afraid you must.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘I want to live here with you.’ Martrace cried out. ‘Please let me live here with you!’

‘I only wish you could.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But I'm afraid it's not possible. You cannot leave your parents

just because you want to. They have a right to take you with them.’

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‘But what if they agreed?’ Martrace cried eagerly. ‘What if they said yes. Can I stay with you? Would you let me stay with you then?’

Miss. Darling said softly. ‘Yes. that would be heaven.’

‘Well. I think they might!’ Martrace cried. ‘I honestly think they might! They don't care tuppence about me!’ ‘Not so fast.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘We've got to be fast!’ Martrace cried. ‘They're leaving any moment! Come

on!’ she shouted. grasping Miss. Darling's hand. ‘Please come with me and ask them! But we will have to hurry! We'll have to run!’

The next moment the two of them were running down the drive together and then out onto the road. and Martrace was ahead. pulling Miss. Darling after her by her wrist. and it was a wild and wonderful dash they made along the country lane and through the village to the house where Martrace's parents lived. The big black Mercedes was still outside and now its boot, and all its doors were open and Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter and the brother were scurrying around it like

ants. piling in the suitcases. as Martrace and Miss. Darling came dashing up.

‘Daddy and mummy!’ Martrace burst out. gasping for breath. ‘I don't want to go with you! I want to stay here and live with Miss.

Darling and she says that I can but only if you permit me! Please say yes! Go on. daddy. say absolutely!

Say yes. mummy!’

The father turned and looked at Miss. Darling. ‘You're that teacher woman who once came here to see me. aren't you?’ he said. Then he went back to stow the suitcases into the car.

His wife said to him. ‘This one will have to go on the back seat.

There's no more room in the boot.’

‘I would love to have Martrace.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I would look after her with loving care. Mr. Dicksnoter. and I would pay for everything. She would not cost you a penny. But it was not my idea. It was Martrace's. And I will not agree to take her without your full and willing consent.’

‘Come on. Harry.’ the mother said. pushing a suitcase into the back seat. ‘Why don't we let her go if that's

what she wants. It'll be one less to look after.’

‘I'm in a hurry.’ the father said. ‘I've got a plane to catch. If she wants to stay. let her stay. It's fine with me.’

Martrace leaped into Miss. Darling's arms and hugged her. and Miss. Darling hugged her back. and then the mother, father, and brother were inside the car and the car was pulling away with the tires screaming.

The brother gave a wave through the rear window. but the other two did not even look back. Miss. Darling was still hugging the tiny girl in her arms and

neither of them said a word as they stood there watching the big black car tearing around the corner at the end of the road and disappearing forever into the distance.

Martrace 'Hope'... got all she ever wanted...

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